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AN EXISTENTIAL FORMULATION OF
TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES IN NATURE

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RESEARCH APPROVAL AND ORIGINALITY STATEMENT

All work contained in this thesis is original, unless clearly referenced otherwise. It is the result of my own research, and has not been published elsewhere. The research proposal and title was approved at a Programme Approval Panel (PAP) viva in May 2011. Ethical approval was obtained from the NSPC/Middlesex Ethics Board in February 2012 (see Appendix A).

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ABSTRACT

This was a qualitative research study looking at transformative experiences in nature. The aim was to explore and describe these experiences and reflect on their place and impact from an existential perspective, considering implications for psychotherapy and counselling theory and practice. This research was a heuristic study, born from the researcher's personal experience, and focusing on the accounts of the researcher and eight research participants. The interviews were conducted and analysed during the immersion period, though data was analysed using Moustakas' modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Moustakas 1994). The main findings were presented in two parts: a textural-structural description of each person's experience followed by a universal thematic account of the phenomenon. Key findings showed transformative experiences in nature as powerful life experiences that impact long-after the particular moment; that sense of self and emotional awareness are experienced differently from more day to day life in these moments so that we might begin to consider emotions as being defined more in relation to *in-the-world*; that there is an increased connection with and awareness of embodiment; that people feel freer from social constraints and therefore more connected to their self as a locus of meaning; that transformative experiences in nature connect the physical and the spiritual dimensions; that our current language and meaning construction sometimes make talking about and documenting these experiences challenging. The implications of this research are that place and the physical dimension should be reconsidered in therapy practice more centrally as part of the content of experience, rather than the stage on which therapy and life is set; that *being in place* offers a different and creative avenue of exploration; and that future investigation would be beneficial to further consider the relationship between emotional experience and place.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH FOCUS

It is widely documented that people have transformative experiences in nature, yet these experiences remain outside of the theory and practice of mainstream psychotherapy and counselling. Transformative experiences are referred to in literature and poetry, symbolised in art and religions, yet they are a phenomenon that has been under-researched, hardly described in any great detail, in relation to therapy endeavours. There are descriptive accounts of transformative experiences in nature in the writings of ecotherapists and ecopsychologists, but these are integrated into and woven with associated environmental beliefs and underlying assumptions that make shining a fresh light on the experience outside of the associated meanings very difficult. Exploring and considering the phenomenon of transformative experience in nature and how it is experienced is therefore the focus of this research, in order to bring awareness and understanding to the actual experience and how it is lived. It is from descriptive accounts of experience that I will begin to appreciate the phenomenon, exploring key themes and their implications for psychotherapy and counselling.

BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

This research project was facilitated by a quest to understand and elucidate the phenomenon of transformative experiences through being in nature. My personal experience of being immersed in wild, natural environments has been transformative across many different levels. Therefore, this project is grounded in an heuristic enquiry of my own experiences and centred around a phenomenological description of research participants who have described transformative experiences, both in the individual interviews that I undertook and in written accounts. Through these accounts and my own experience I will consider how this relates to the theory of existential therapy and to future practice. This thesis explores the

phenomenological experience of transformative experience in nature, and then considers the integration of a focus on healing in nature within the existential modality. Bringing to light transformative experiences in nature is intended to facilitate further description and understanding of the role of the physical dimension in relation to the personal, spiritual and social dimensions of existence within the structure of Deurzen's four-dimensional model (Deurzen, 2010). Experiential accounts are described in detail to encourage further descriptive elucidation of the experience, and are then considered from an existential perspective.

METHOD

Two specific issues were central to choices concerning method for the research. The first concerned my aim of describing and illuminating the quality of an experience. Given that research is approached either from a qualitative or a quantitative framework, a qualitative study focusing on exploring and richly describing an experience was appropriate and I began to settle on an overall phenomenological approach, focussing on detailed accounts of experiences as they are lived (Moustakas, 1994; Robson, 2002; Van Manen, 1990). The second consideration related to the awareness that my interest in the research had arisen from my personal experience. This led me to Moustakas' heuristic methodology as a best match for the overall aims and intentions of the project, since such an approach places the researcher and their experience at the centre of a process of "internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9).

Although my own experience had led me to the phenomenon at the conception of the research, I wanted to interview and capture a range of descriptions of the phenomenon so I interviewed eight research participants. The overall project followed the heuristic stages of engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis. Within

this framework I decided that I wanted a structured approach to data analysis of the interview transcripts, so I settled on Moustakas' modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological data analysis (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121-122).

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THE THESIS

The literature related to transformative experience in nature is reviewed in Chapter 2. This review focuses on literature from ecotherapy and ecopsychology writers who tend to provide the main accounts of the human-nature relationship in the therapy arena. It also reviews how the existential literature views the self in relation, and the relevance this might have in considering the phenomenon. Chapter 3 outlines key methodology and method considerations and reflects on my decision-making process, intentions and aims. It also details how I collected and analysed the data on a step by step basis. Chapter 4 presents the findings of my analysis: the first part offers individual descriptive accounts of the phenomenon compiled from my analysis, and the second part focuses on a universal description of the phenomenon and thematic analysis. Chapter 5 begins with a discussion of the research process followed by discussion on the impact of the research, data collection and analysis issues and validity. The final part of the chapter is an extensive discussion of the findings, focusing on key themes. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis, identifying some implications for practice and suggesting some areas for possible further research.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW

This literature review is part of an intense period of immersion involving an internal search and reflection on the phenomenon of transformative experiences in nature (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). The criteria for selecting the books, papers, poetry and websites chosen have been reflexively formed from an organized process of returning to and being guided by the experience of the phenomenon (Etherington, 2004). Every text, each particular reference is the result of “searching for qualities, conditions, and relationships that underlie a fundamental question, issue, or concern” (ibid, p. 11). This has been a creative process of cyclical motion between focussed indwelling in the phenomenon and reflective analysis on both the content and process (ibid, p. 24). Part of considering the overview of the whole has been to ensure that a range of experiences of being in nature are included and reviewed.

"I watch as the wind rolls across the garden and booms against the brickwork of my room. I watch the sycamore trees reflected in the mirror by my desk. The booming intensifies; the sycamores are dancing. Love moves inside me, and it seems - even mediated by a mirror that my love is reciprocated. It has been like that as long as I remember, and really, there's nothing to be said about it. I love Earth; it feels that Earth loves me: that's just how it is.....".

Perraton Mountford (2006, p. 99)

Being in nature can be transformative. This research focuses on describing transformative experiences in nature, and considers how these experiences relate to, and impact on, existential psychotherapy. Loosely then, the literature reviewed and included has fallen into three broad camps – firstly, literature related to relational ideas of self-definition and experience, secondly, literature related to experience of being in nature and thirdly, how these

sorts of experiences are accounted for from a broadly existential philosophical approach and in poetry and literature. At the conception of this project I intended to separate out the theoretical from the more experiential, but this proved futile and incongruent with the phenomenon. The literature itself showed me that this very separation, of nature from rationality, underlines the absence of the man-nature relationship from the heart of much of modern living, how we construct and practice therapy and how we consider and approach emotional and mental distress and healing.

THE HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIP: IGNORED AND TAKEN FOR GRANTED

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.

John Donne, Meditation

XVII (2012, p. 46)

Donne's evocative description of connection and relationship jars sharply with the present 21st century idea of self, where self and personality are defined in isolated concrete terms, standing as static entities capable of being either 'normal' or 'disordered' independent and extracted from 'other' or 'environment'. Carl Jung wrote of the separatist, individualist ethos of the times 'I remain I and you remain you' (Jung, 1975, p. 586). This ethos continues in the mainstream psychiatric system's approach to existence, outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV (A.P.A., 2000), which barely acknowledges the inter-human impact on health, distress, well-being and healing, yet alone any connection with nature. As a species, humans position themselves at the top of the evolutionary tree, with each step on the branches feeling increasingly distanced from the soil of its roots. Technological advancements of the

last century distance us further from the earth, meaning that we are less likely than ever to shine a light on our relationship with nature, to attend to it either for our individual or reciprocal wellbeing. Maiteny, an ecotherapist, notes that although we cannot not be part of the whole, we "use the evolutionary gifts of our mind, consciousness, free will, intellect, imaginations, to insist on behaving as if we are not" (Maiteny, 2012, p. 57). While Maiteny's writing is in the context of considering approaches to what he considers the environmental crisis of our times, his writing could equally be describing the mainstream approach to health, wellbeing and psychotherapy. Stevens (2010) notes that while general healthcare provision has begun to appreciate that mind and body cannot be extracted from each other, the awareness that "the separation of self and environment is an equally false dichotomy" has not yet been recognised widely outside of the ecotherapy and ecospsychology arenas (ibid, p. 265).

A normal view of being in nature is that it is better for us, restorative, and it is widely documented, from walking magazines to the literature included in this chapter, that when people are out in nature, spending time walking, for example, or in environmental restoration projects or wilderness retreats they feel broadly better about themselves. However, it is difficult to unravel what this means, what is going on, and to some extent this normal view is just assumed as a given and left dormant. In some measure our language also does not help in encouraging enquiry into this phenomenon, in that polarities and the construction of difference are pervasive: self/other; I/you; man/beast; client/therapist; inner/outer.

THE NATURE OF EXISTENTIAL BEING?

In contrast to much of mainstream psychiatry and psychology, existential philosophy and existential therapy writings view human beings not as isolated static personalities, but rather as relational existents *in-the-world* (Deurzen, 2002). From both a biological and

psychological perspective "we exist in the world and our interdependence is total" (Milton, 2010, p. 294). Heidegger's Dasein, translated into 'being-in-the-world', opposes the isolation of person from relationship, the extraction of person from world, acknowledging the interconnected basis of living and being (Heidegger, 1962). Sartre asks "What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world - and defines himself afterwards." (Sartre, 1946, p. 29). The self that we define arises out of our being in the world, rather than as a predefined, firmly boundaried personality entity implanted onto an already existing world. Heidegger's writing proposes that the "compound expression of 'Being-in-the-World' indicates in the very way we have coined it, that it stands for a unitary phenomenon. This primary datum must be seen as a whole" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 78). Heidegger's account of the relationship between natural world and human existence attempts to do away with the conception of separately defined entities, placing 'world' as integral to any awareness of being:

"Being-in-the-world shall first be made visible with regard to that item of its structure which is the 'world' itself"

(ibid, p. 91).

Merleau-Ponty (1969) describes the intrinsic human-nature existence outside of the usual subject-object split, concentrating on the middle ground of phenomenology. This ecophenomenological approach focuses on the relational, whether the beings that are part of the relationship are human or otherwise, and is concerned with the material quality of being in relation (Brown and Toadvine, 2003). Abram (1996) refers to the "animate earth" and focuses on our being part of the animate earth in which we experience (ibid, p. x).

Contemporary existential psychotherapy theorists also focus on relational lived experience (Cooper, 2003; Deurzen 2002; Spinelli, 2007). Deurzen's four-dimensional model considers

the individual's relational existence on the physical dimension as well as the personal, social and spiritual dimensions (Deurzen, 2002). Deurzen and Arnold-Baker describe how the "material world is the foundation of any person's existence" (Deurzen and Arnold-Baker, 2005, p. 30). Our relationship with the world that we live in is important to us: how we relate to our natural environment, our own physical sensory experiences, the qualities of the world around us. An existential-phenomenological approach to therapy practice focuses on inter-relatedness (Deurzen, 2002). However, this inter-relatedness is primarily considered within the human-human sphere, rather than the human-nature relationship. While existential therapy does explore and value experiencing on the physical dimension and acknowledges this as important in therapeutic endeavours, to some extent there is a hierarchy or separation of *place* in the dimensional structure, and of *place* within the physical dimension, in that place is assumed *the location of* an experience, rather than integral to its understanding or to the understandings of experiences that might be described as residing on more social, personal or spiritual plains.

A person-centred perspective, as the name suggests, tends to focus on the self in less of an inter-connected, relational way than in existential philosophy (Rogers, 1951). Rogers proposes that: "Every individual exists in a continually changing world of experience of which he is the center" (Rogers, 1951, p. 483). Although the boundaries between 'self' and 'world' seem more demarcated in Rogers' writings, he later describes how:

"the actualising tendency of individual organisms is a microcosm of a broader 'formative' tendency that is evident in cells, galaxies etc. This creates potential for human beings to develop an ever deeper awareness of their place in the universe, and can serve as a basis for a theory of humanistic psychology"

(Rogers, 1978, p. 46).

From this account we share something, some tendency or attribute, with our wider world. Roger's statement resonates with Sartre's writings on the experience of being outside of oneself, that "it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes man to exist; and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent aims that he himself is able to exist". (Sartre, 1946, p. 67). The boundary between self and other, whether other is person, nature or world, is not clear cut; it is, at the very least, more porous than the mainstream individualist discourse around 'self' of our present age.

With such relational, world-based, underpinnings to the writings of both existential philosophers and therapists, it is surprising to find such limited description of transformative experiences in nature. While Deurzen and Milton have provided accounts (which will be highlighted further) these are by no means representative or extensive descriptions, though they do offer the sort of invitation to further exploration that to some extent has fuelled this research (Deurzen, 2008; Milton, 2008).

THE ECO-WRITERS: HEALING THE EARTH, HEALING THE MIND

Once we start to approach the boundaries of self more fluidly we open ourselves to being touched by the other and move into the realms of the eco writers. We can start to more creatively and naively imagine how we interconnect with our world, how we relate to nature. James Hillman (1995), an ecopsychologist and neo-Jungian writing in the forward of Roszak's "Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth Healing the Mind" (1995) says "There is only one core issue for all psychology. *Where is the "me"?* Where does the "me" begin? Where does the "me stop. Where does the "other" begin?" (Hillman, 1995, p. xxvii).

Hillman describes how

"For most of history, psychology took for granted an intentional subject: the biographical "me" that was the agent and the sufferer of all "doings". For most of its history, psychology

located this "me" within human persons defined by their physical skin and their immediate behaviour".

(Hillman, 1995, p. xxvii).

Hillman suggests that "the deepest self cannot be confined to "in here" because we can't be sure it is not also or even entirely "out there". (Hillman 1995: xix). Existential writers, such as Merleau-Ponty, have highlighted the holistic nature of our experience, pointing towards the arbitrary distinction made between 'self' and 'not-self':

"Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system"

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 371).

The border between self and the natural world is therefore a subjective cut within a system, rather than demarcating two different systems: "we can make it at the skin or we can take it as far out as we like - to the deep oceans and distant stars" (Hillman, 1995, p. xix). As Roszak suggests, the critical point is not so much where we decide the boundary is; rather what is important is "the recognition of uncertainty about making the cut at all." (Roszak, 1995, p. xix). Metzner writes about 'green psychology' from the stance of changing our relationship with the earth, suggesting that "seeing ourselves as communicating nerve cells in the body of Gaia, Earth, necessitates a shift in perspective" (Metzner, 1999, p. 37). From this vantage, the potential for change and transformation in any part of the system rests anywhere within that system.

Bateson (1972) also takes a systemic focus, suggesting that to consider our existence as ending at the skin of our bodies is to deny the presence of a whole. Bateson questions the notion of 'I', the location of self boundaries and the extent to which we, as humans, tend to speak from an 'I' perspective. How we conceptualise self within the holistic system influences

our relationship with self and the system (Bateson, 1972; Rust and Totton, 2012). Bateson cites Buber's (1937) writing on the I-Thou and I-It relationships, where the more usual pattern of relating to the world is I-It, as human to inanimate object. Bateson suggests that an "I-Thou relationship is conceivable between man and his society or ecosystem" (Bateson, 1972, p. 452). This approach to relationship, where love and care are privileged over purpose and function, offers the potential for a much deeper emotional experience with nature, a relationship that falls outside of a more separatist, exclusively human-centric ethos. Bodnar, a relational psychoanalyst, has researched the transformed relationship between human and their ecosystems with the "assumption that the human relationship to the physical environment was another object relationship" (Bodnar, 2012, p. 17). Bodnar noted that the people that "conceive nature as a component of the self have changed the way they live" (ibid, p. 27). In particular they have what are described as "deeper more complex relationships to the ecosystems" (ibid). How we conceptualize self and nature, therefore, would seem to have an impact on how we relate in it. The writers described here believe passionately in the deep connection between a hurting earth and a hurting mind, and as the title of Roszak's book suggests, that healing both are intrinsically connected (Roszak, p. 1995). The ethical and theoretical underpinnings of the approach are very environmentalist, making it almost impossible to separate out description of transformative experiences, where they are present, from the meanings and assumptions that are both contained within them and from which they are born.

PROBLEMS WITH CONNECTION AND DISCONNECTION

“And forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair.”

Kahlil Gibran (1926, p. 47)

Ecopsychologists suggest that changes in our 'external' world may be as therapeutic as alterations in subjective feelings, challenging the standard, almost exclusive focus on the individual in much of individual psychotherapy and psychology (Roszak, 1995). Ecopsychology and ecotherapy focus on our relationship with our natural world, and environmental psychiatry focuses on the 'external realm' of clients, even at the most fundamental level of specific places and objects, considering the environmental impact on distress that mainstream psychiatry would label as 'disorders' and locate in the individual. (Hillman, 1995, p. xxi). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV refers to nature only in relation to diagnosis of seasonal major depressive disorder (A.P.A., p. 2000). According to Hillman, our current models of mainstream therapy are actually limiting the potential of people by focusing on problems as if they are all internal, ignoring both the political and social spheres (Hillman, 1995). Ecopsychologists such as Hillman do not suggest that we only pay attention to being-in-nature, or to what we might usually consider as 'the outer' but that we begin to appreciate distress, problems with living and the locus of healing in a more holistic light (Fisher, 2002; Hillman, 1995; Roszak, 1995). Clinebell (1996) proposes that feeling fulfilled and living a meaningful life is dependent on answering the problem of our alienation from nature. Snyder (1989) studied feeling connected in nature, describing the feeling of connection as being like a fulfilling reunion, finding a whole again (ibid, p. 172). Jordan (2009b) suggests that we have developed a split separation between nature and ourselves to provide a safe-guard, distancing us from our vulnerabilities and the reality of our actual dependency. It is tempting to see the writings of the ecotherapists and ecopsychologists as new or alternative. However, the relationship between man and environment, looking to the earth and environment for healing, guidance and sustenance, is embedded in ancient and modern indigenous and tribal cultures and rituals and literature (Greenwood and Leeuw, 2007; Milton and Higley, 2008; Roszak, 1995). In Emerson's words from 1849:

"In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet it is now unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right".

(Emerson, 1849, p.4)

Emerson's powerful description outlines his sense of connection with nature and with time, how it changes his experience to "that better emotion" (ibid). Harper, a wilderness practitioner, points out that "people have always turned to wilderness to become whole again" (Harper, 1995, p. 184). Approximately 2,500 years ago Hippocrates (2009 [nd]) wrote in his treatise "On Airs, Waters and Places" that to consider the health of any person we must examine very carefully the environment and seasons of that person. Hillman asks us to consider where else in time and history has a "human soul been so divorced from the spirit of the surroundings" (Hillman, 1995, p. xxii). Accepting that we are beings in relation, embedded and embodied in the natural world, we can begin to see that this part of who we are is significant to the quality and potential of our lived experience.

Macy and Brown (1998) describe practices to help us begin to heal our relationship with the world. The focus of their writing is more environmental, or global than that of Hillman's more explicit extraction of how environmental connection impacts the individual. However, in pointing to the obvious environmental damage of our present age, they suggest that if we switch off from the pain that the world is feeling we necessarily switch off, or deaden ourselves. In reconnecting with what is happening in the world, we reconnect with the pain

and despair in the world, yet we also reawaken from a deadened, coma-like existence (ibid). Macy and Brown use terms found in psychoanalytic sources, such as denial and repression, to frame our present relationship with nature (ibid). However, the denial and repression they speak of is a pain experienced or expressed by the individual but located in the holistic system.

Again, there is a feeling of something of a polarity split between the eco writers that suggest that there is something principally wrong with our relationship with nature and who focus on that almost exclusively or the mainstream practice of psychotherapy that almost casts the relationship into the wilderness. Milton and Higley point to how our being in nature is “a neglected relationship in counselling psychology” and how this might be part of some of our present-day concerns and problems. (Milton and Higley, 2008, p. 10). Implicit in this statement is this reverse of the argument, that focusing on the relationship might be part of a resolution of some of these concerns.

NATURE AND HEALING

Nature has been turned to for healing and wellbeing across times and cultures, as documented, for example, in the writings of Berger and McLeod (2006), Buzzell and Chalquist (2009), Fisher (1996), Milton and Higley (2008), Roszak et al (1995) and Rust and Totton (2012). Orr, in the foreword to Buzzell and Chalquist (2009), writes:

"We now know, however, that the health of any living system is seldom tied to any single part but is dependent on both lesser and larger things. In other words, health is a systems concept that cannot be split off from the whole"

(ibid, p. 13)

The theme, running throughout the ecotherapy literature, is that we cannot maintain health as individual humans if we are part of an unhealthy system. Buzzell and Chalquist (2009) suggest that:

"The problem of our day is an inner deadening, an increasingly deployed defence against the stresses of living in an overbuilt industrialised civilization saturated by intrusive advertising and media, unregulated toxic chemicals, unhealthy food, parasitic business practices, time-stressed living, and (in the United States) a heart-warping culture of perpetual war and relentlessly political propaganda".

(ibid, p. 19).

Buzzell and Chalquist highlight their belief that so much of what we see as mental health symptoms are caused by the way we live, and part of this is our relationship with nature and our planet (ibid). Reconnecting with nature, taking part in wilderness retreats, shifting from artificial schedules towards more embodied time are seen as pathways to healing (ibid). Again it is difficult though to reach descriptions of transformative experience in nature that are not based on the assumption that something was wrong *with the relationship* to begin with. The "mind-body-world web contains its own freely available healing potentials" which Buzzell and Chalquist suggest have been experienced as transformative by all of the contributors to their anthology (ibid, p. 20). Outdoor excursions form a central part of ecotherapy and participants in such activities, including wilderness therapy have reported experiences including:

- A sense of balance
- Relief from day to day stress
- Reawakening of a sense of belonging in nature
- Awe and wonder through reconnecting with nature as a central need

- Increases in self-esteem, behaviour change and interpersonal skills (ibid) (Buzzell and Chalquist, 2009, p. 71).

While these sorts of benefits are noted in a range of literature, detailed specific data directly linked with ecopsychology and healing remains limited (Thompson, 2009). Adventure and wilderness therapy are examples of practices that are presently used to facilitate emotional wellbeing (Beringer, 2004, Eggleston, 1998; Jordan, 2009a; Jordan and Marshall, 2010; Russell, 2001). How nature is positioned and considered in the therapy varies: for example, sometimes the focus of adventure and wilderness therapy is on taking part in various activities and any therapeutic outcome is correlated with the activity with limited consideration to the nature in which the therapy is situated (Beringer, 2004). Sometimes specific client issues are focused on in wilderness therapy. Wilderness therapy for victims of sexual assault, for example, uses the outdoors and nature to explore uncomfortable situations that resonate with the experiences of assault that can then be reframed (Levine, 1994; Powch 1994). Family therapy in the wild confronts issues of dependency, intimacy and reliance through a range of shared activities (Mason 1987). Horticultural therapy is practiced with a wide range of people from projects as part of EcoMinds (Mind, 2007) to the Natural Growth Project at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture (Linden and Grut, 2002). Linden and Grut (2002) detail the value of working with nature as a source of healing describing "nature as sanctuary, as balm to soothe our troubled souls" (ibid, p. 18). As one of the clients of the project articulated "When I garden I feel I have a painkiller medicine to make me strong" (ibid, p. 44). Another client said "It is the space and time I'm giving to myself on the land that has allowed me to clean my heart... I believe that the work is holy". (ibid, p. 30). This reconnection is particularly important and central to therapeutic work with people that have often been incarcerated and denied access to fresh air and natural light:

"If we do not consider ourselves connected with nature we are in a state of disconnection and this is what shattered lives are about. If we cannot make a link with what is outside ourselves, we cannot get to know ourselves. People who are imprisoned are starved of natural light, of fresh air, of contact with the natural world. This deprivation of the natural element in our lives causes psychological damage."

Grut (ibid)

Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) found that people with views of nature feel better physically and also report reduced stress and Dwivedi and Harper (2004) reported improved mental wellbeing after participation in a 12-week ecotherapy programme. Studies also suggest that patients in hospital fair better generally with contact with nature, either in reality or through visual images (Winter and Koger, 2010).

Ancient practices, such as the healing-circle ceremonies of Native Americans, were based on the premise that being in nature has the potential for healing (Metzner, 1999). Winter and Koger (2010) suggests that being in wild nature has positive effects including experiencing "positive emotions such as pleasure, happiness, satisfaction, peace and tranquillity" (ibid, 254). However, there is a caution that runs throughout much of the ecopsychology writing against *using* nature for healing since it is often framed as exploitative and human-centric (Winter and Koger, 2010; Greenway, 1995).

The correlation between environmental and situational triggers and physical health and wellbeing is widely known and increasingly taken seriously by mainstream medicine: that environmental stressors, the air that we breathe and the food that we eat, are correlated with ill-health from Asthma to Alzheimer's, for example, or with good health and wellbeing. Yet, the same acknowledgement of the impact of the environment on mental and emotional health and wellbeing is not so widely researched or valued, and still to a large extent remains the

preserve of minority interested parties, as outlined by Bodnar (2012). However, the Sustainable Development Commission in U.K., which was closed by the coalition government in 2011, highlighted research that suggested that people with access to green spaces outdoors have fewer mental health problems and that being in nature has restorative effects (Sustainable Development Commission, 2008).

Jung, whose writings continue to influence much of the ecopsychology movement, spent periods of time immersed in nature, at his retreat in Bollingen on the edge of Lake Zurich and travelled extensively around the world (Jung, 2007). Jung was travelling in New Mexico and had a dialogue with a Pueblo Indian at the foot of some mountains. Jung described realizing that all life came from the mountain and its water: “I felt a swelling emotion connected with the word “mountain”” (Jung, 1961, p. 249). He suggested that if we “put away all European rationalism.... If we set aside our intimate knowledge of the world and exchange it for a horizon that seems immeasurable” we will have an “inner comprehension” that “all life comes from the mountain” (ibid). This transformative, experiential understanding connects with something outside of what we normally see as our own boundaries: “At times I feel like I am spread out over the landscape and inside things” (Jung, 1967, p. 252).

Jung made practical suggestions in connection with our relationship with nature centred around ideas that would seem familiar to many of us today, such as working with the land, avoiding being swamped by technology, and the like. However, the purpose that he gave for these sorts of suggestions was not, like we might envisage, to help us to nourish nature and our environment, rather it was to “let nature affect us” (ibid, p. 19). Jung balanced the environmentalist stance to suggest that we let nature in to heal us (ibid).

MOVING TOWARDS NATURE AND TRANSFORMATION

That people have profound, transformative experiences in nature, perhaps of the kind outlined by Jung, is documented in literature and poetry from all eras. Being in nature is anecdotally recognized as encouraging creative potential, restoring our spirits and shifting our perspectives. Deurzen describes how “immersion in nature (walking, gardening, sailing etc.) has tremendously positive effects on all human functioning” (Deurzen, 2008, p. 54). Milton and Higley (2008) have found that “even brief contact with the natural world provides relief from stress” and that “there are also longer term, more profound benefits to be gained through contact with the natural world” (Milton and Higley 2008: 36). Hicks, a chartered counselling psychologist, concurs: “I think it can have important implications for our sense of self experiencing a true connection with the world around us” (Hicks, 2008, p. 7). In her ecotherapy writing Caroline Brazier talks of coming “face to face with the deep truth of existence” when we encounter nature, both in “its perpetual recreation and its spiritual quality” (Brazier, 2011, p.34). She describes being in nature as the best kind of therapy and how the surprising, unplanned quality of being in nature “unsettles our habitual ways of interacting with life”, freeing us up from “more rigid ideas of living and preconceived structures and expectations” (ibid, p. 35). Research commissioned by Mind (2007) shows that individual mental health improves substantially after being in nature: 94 % of those surveyed highlighted particular mental health benefits in relation to ‘green exercise’ (Mind, 2007, p. 20). De Young (2010) details the benefits of walking outside, noting in particular the positive effect walking can have on mental vitality and the relationship this has with emotional management and cognitive reasoning. Ecotherapists working with people on trips into the wilderness commonly report “dramatic breakthroughs” (Kanner and Gomes, 1995, p. 91). Being in the natural world

“awakens in every fiber of our being the primal knowledge of connection and graces us with a few moments of sheer awe, it can shatter the hubris and isolation so necessary of narcissistic defences”

(ibid).

Foster and Little (1999) based their 'four shields' psychology on the medicine wheel of Native American tradition where the four directions correspond with compass points, the seasons and psychological stages. Foster and Little (1987) describe the recreation of an ancient rite of passage of rebirth, called Vision Quest, based around a period of fasting in the wilderness in order to formally mark the end of a crisis, for example, and move over a threshold into a new way of being. Little describes how nature touched him:

"I saw that my journey would be an inward one, into the wilderness of my heart, and double-edged outward journey, into the wilderness of rock, sand, and water, and into the wild, tangled jungle of other people's lives. These wildernesses, so dissimilar, yet of the same Source, were bridged, connected, and made one, when I drew water from the rock"

(ibid, p.14)

Metzner (1999) describes his participation in similar rituals based in Native American traditions, ceremonies where the spirits of earth, air, water and fire are invoked. When he took part he found that he experienced a greater sense of interrelatedness, balance and overall wellbeing (ibid, p. 47). Metzner also describes guided imagery work in individual psychotherapy and groups in which he used visual and auditory imagery of elements in nature. In his experience, particular elements in nature induced particular experiences in consciousness which are often associated with ancient earth-based traditions (ibid, p. 38-39).

For example:

- Images and sounds of air and wind were correlated with mental associations, thoughts and ideas;

- Images and sounds related to water seemed to release strong emotions and feeling memories;
- Images and sounds of fire were linked with creativity and imagination;
- Images and sounds concerned with the earth resulted in associations of kinaesthetic, bodily, sensory awareness, and a sense of solidity. (ibid).

EXPANSION AND AWARENESS

“But still in the field where we danced last summer, acorns lie beneath the old oak trees among the grass of the field, waiting for springtime.

(Brazier, 2011, p. ix).

Milton describes experiences of being in Africa and how these sorts of experiences give “an opportunity for all our senses to make themselves known and for us to respond fully to the world that we are a part of” in contrast to what he sees as more directed perception of life in urban environments (Milton, 2008, p. 39-40). Self-awareness in remote nature is described as “qualitatively different from that experienced in the hustle and bustle of the concrete jungle” as the separation of “experience and experiencer is exposed as being a very fragile construct” (ibid). Harper’s experience of wilderness practice shows that one of the most immediate occurrences upon being in wild nature is sensory awareness and expansion, and that this awakening is a ‘subtly powerful and underrated experience’ (Harper, 1995, p. 188). We experience a physical connection and alertness with, in and through nature. Being in nature intensifies experiences and our awareness, it brings “many encounters which cannot be engineered or planned” (Brazier, 2011, p. 31). What we reject or accept, embrace or distance in nature and wilderness shows us something of what we embrace or not in ourselves. Nature holds a reflective mirror to our own values, judgements and anxieties.

A recurring theme in descriptions of being in nature is people's experience that their sense of self expands (Brazier, 2011; Harper, 1995; Milton, 2008; Roszak, 1995). Greenway, an ecopsychologist, has questioned 1,380 people that have passed through wilderness programs. He noted how people tend to feel a sense of expansion and of reconnection with something important, feeling released from the repression of cultural norms and day-to-day practices (Greenway, 1995). Previous fixed limitations and self-identities seem to loosen as people become immersed in natural processes, and people are surprised and sometimes feel quite overwhelmed by experiencing strengths and inner reserves that they were not previously aware of. These experiences often happen when people are outside of what they might usually find comfortable, facing an experience where they are anxious or afraid. As Camus wrote: 'In the depths of winter I at last discovered that there was in me an invincible summer' (Camus, 1968, p. 169).

Foster and Little (1987) describe the expansion of self and experience through extended wilderness trips as part of Vision Quests. Time feels expanded as research participants face eternity. The boundaries of what is real or not real are confronted and may be expanded:

"You will hear voices, but you will not see another living soul. As your mind is the only interpretive instrument you possess, you may wish to alter your sense of what is real by listening more closely to that which might otherwise regard as unimportant or unreal"

(ibid, p. 42).

NOURISHMENT

Rust, a Jungian analyst and ecopsychologist has spent many years working with people with difficult relationships with food. She argues that we are all "hungry for a relationship with land, with place, with our bodies. This is nature hunger" (Rust, 2008, p. 77). She describes how "spending time outside, whether it be in our back gardens or in the wilds of nature, is

profoundly healing, and this can be a powerful ally in helping us to recover a relationship with our nature” (ibid). In Michael Roads’ (1985) accounts of his relationship in nature, he portrays the nourishment of his whole being which nature offered him. Roads (ibid) describes his powerful, transformative dialogue in nature:

“I was on this journey only because, after years of resistance, I was finally allowing a powerful inner reality to emerge.” As Roads “clambered over an outcrop of smooth yet convoluted granite overlooking the gully” and the “fresh foliage of the treetops swayed and danced..... An energy, wide open, expansive, and of light-filled proportion, swept around and through me.”

(ibid, p. 42).

GROUNDING EMBODIMENT

The sort of experiences of immersion in nature outlined by Brazier (2011) and Roszak (1995) point to the increased awareness and sense of expansion of embodied feelings taking prominence over intellectual and verbal understandings. Mainstream therapy tends to focus on words and dialogue. Being in nature helps focus on the preverbal and experiential, and frees up experience, particularly for people that might feel stuck in particular narratives (Brazier, 2011). The flavour of these experiences resonates with Gendlin’s description of focussing practice (Gendlin, 2003). Part of the sense of feeling embodied, grounded and connected is some sense of feeling ‘at home’, rooted to earth, returning to something fundamental and essential, awakening to a feeling of being “intrinsically linked into and a part of the natural world” (Jordan, 2009a, p. 29). This feeling of being embodied and having a place is captured evocatively by Conran:

“Each blade of grass has its spot on earth whence it draws its life, its strength; and so is man rooted to the land from which he draws his together with his life”. (Conran, 1900, p. 167)

BOUNDARIES

Watching the wind push the mist over the peak of a mountain, or listening to the rhythm of the tide retreat and advance, reminds and reconnects us with the finite boundaries of our existence as we know and understand it. "Encountering life and death, growth and change, we experience things which are sometimes disturbing and other times uplifting, but always grounding". (Brazier, 2011, p. 31). As the leaves fall off trees, or the buds break after the last frost, we are reminded that we are alive in a present that is ever-changing: we are grounded in a finite experience. Pinkola Estes (2008) describes the Life/Death/Life cycle, and how being in nature, perhaps taking part in activities such as gardening, we are shown this natural process of existence: "Both life-giving and death-dealing natures are waiting to be befriended, forever loved" (ibid, p. 97).

In modern existence we are shielded from much of the reality of human existence, maintaining an illusion that we are safe from our fears, particularly the most primitive fears of destruction and death. Being in nature reminds us of these fears and their basis in the reality of our existential boundaries, helping us to accept and harness our anxieties, urging us to live the life that we have now (ibid).

PRESENT TIME

Accounts of being in nature, particularly for extend period of times, reflect a shift in people's experiences of time: commonly reported is a sense of "timelessness" (Harper, 1995, p. 192). Time is described as becoming "less linear and more cyclic", opening up what is experienced as a "new and different world" (ibid, p. 183). Jung describes the experience of being out of kilter with nature "It is as if our consciousness had somehow slipped from its natural foundations and no longer knew how to get along on nature's timings" (Jung, 1969, p. 802). In accounts of immersion experiences in nature, two temporal important themes emerge:

being present and historical context (Brazier, 2011; Roszak, 1995). Being present and attending to the detail in the natural world slows us down from what can sometimes feel like a frenetic pace, helping us to reawaken our too often silenced natural bodily rhythms. We are alive in a particular moment, and focussing on the experience of being when we are in nature, removed from the normal rush of life, helps us put to one side anxieties of the future or regrets of the past, lightens our spirits and remind us of a present that matters. Through the seasons, through experiencing sunrises and sunsets, we become more in-tune with the existential boundaries of our time, "of birth and death and the life-giving warmth of the sun" (Brazier, 2011, p. 47). In nature, we become more aware of living within temporal limits and what these mean to us (Pienaar, 2011).

Harper's beautiful and emotional account of being in wilderness while he was grieving describes his experience of being with nature's rhythm: "We followed exactly what was before us, and as the day wore on I found myself softening to and accepting whatever emerged inside" (Harper, 1995, p. 184). In being more in tune with his natural rhythms his emotional experience flowed without census and he was sustained by the nature around him: "My heart and belly felt expansive, and gradually I was overcome by the strangest sensation of webs connecting me with all that was around" (ibid). There was a sense of complete absorption and immersion in the experience, the kind of experienced suggested by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as the 'flow' that is likely to bring about a sense of happiness and wellbeing.

SPIRITUAL

"Hosannah! Not in the highest, but right here, right now, this!"

Goodenough (1998, p. 169)

The sense of expansion described thus far has a recurrent theme of going beyond or expanding a fixed idea of self, perhaps connecting with or pointing to something beyond understanding, at least at a cognitive level. Deurzen outlines her sense of the spiritual dimension, *Überwelt*, as the “meta-world where all the rest of our experience is put into context (Deurzen, 2010, p. 125). When we consider the boundaries of our lives, in the context of our place in the universe, our perspective shifts from ‘self-important illusions of being the centre’ (ibid, p. 26). Bateson's (1972) articulation of the cybernetic epistemology suggests the individual mind is not solely located in the body, that the mind on a personal level is merely a sub-system where the larger Mind is comparable to God. Indeed he suggests that this larger structure is perhaps what people understand as God and that “it is still immanent in the total interconnected social system and planetary ecology” (ibid, p. 467). The experience of being in awe-inspiring nature can have a quality akin to that of worshipping the unknown: “The mysterious lawfulness of the universe – material, relational, personal and ontological – is enough to fill the human heart with a sense of marvel, awe and exuberance” (ibid, p. 127). Maslow's exploration of peak experiences suggested that the sorts of experiences that had previously been considered the reserve of prophets and at the heart of religion were in fact potentially transcendental experiences open to us all (Maslow, 1970; Hoffman, 1998).

Being in wild nature touches people at a profound spiritual level and these experiences are often described as peak or pivotal: religious figures at the centre of many faiths sought solace in nature, from Jesus in the desert to Buddha in the forest. Many descriptions of transformative experiences seem to have a spiritual feel about them, a sense of mystery, acceptance and faith in some natural system or order, and a sense of the experience being beyond words, such as those outlined by Foster and Little (1987) and in Jung's writings (1967). Morgan describes how the focus of Buddhism is enlightenment: “a process of coming to see things as they are without the overlays that result from experiencing the world from the

perspective of a separate self” (Morgan, 2006, p. 26). Heidegger (2010) uses the German term *gelassenheit*, translated to mean releasement, to describe letting go or letting be, and the original German word is related to a religious or existential letting-go and letting-be (ibid, p. xi). Religions across time place nature and our connection to earth at their heart, perhaps most notably the pantheistic correlation that equates God or divinity with nature and the universe. Goodenough (1998), in her discussion of emergent religious principles, describes how we find ourselves in a planet that is perfect for our existence:

“We arrived, but a moment ago, and found it to be perfect for us in every way. And then we came to understand that it is perfect because we arose from it and are a part of it”

(Goodenough, 1998, p. 168).

LITERATURE REVIEW SUMMARY

Literature, both ancient and modern, shows that being in nature can potentially be transformative. There are key themes that emerge linked to experiences in nature, themes such as connection, expansion, increased embodiment, healing in nature and a spiritual appreciation. However, the mainstream view of self as separate from world makes these sorts of transformative experiences harder to explore and make sense of: it takes them out of the focus of awareness. Even our language makes articulating such experience difficult with its focus on distinction, definition and separation. Existential philosophy, in contrast to much of mainstream psychology and psychotherapy, does not focus on the self outside of context, *being* is intrinsically *in-the-world* (Heidegger, 1962). However, much of the relational focus of existential writers is on a human-human level, and place still assumes the status of object on which life is played out, rather than being integral to the subjective experience.

Ecopsychologists and ecotherapists have focused exclusively on the human-world relationship, challenging the western status quo's boundaries of self and world as fixed and

permanent. The location of the 'cut' that demarcates self and other is considered subjective in the ecotherapy literature. Eco practitioners suggest that we move to focus our attention on the nature-self relationship: this is positioned at the centre of practice and is the principle focus for restoring psychological wellbeing. The theme running throughout the eco literature that we cannot be healthy individuals in an unhealthy system, that mental health problems are at least partially caused by the way we live, is not an assumption either supported or contested in this research. However, the same body of literature does point to experiences in nature as being potentially transformative, often in terms of taking part in particular wilderness or immersion activities, though it is almost impossible to extract descriptions of transformative experiences from the pro-environmental, politicised themes that are central to the writings.

To some extent the underlying aim and intention of this research agrees at least with the ecopsychology and ecotherapy point that nature has been left out of more conventional psychotherapy practice. However, the research presented here is resoundingly human-centric, in that it focuses on exploring human experience of transformation, and to that extent it is very distinct from the anthropocentric intentions of many of the eco writers. While existential writings, like much of mainstream therapy discourse, pay limited attention to the nature-human relationship in terms of its implication for therapy, the existential literature's relational conception of self and world and its focus on the physical, personal, social and spiritual dimensions of human existence, allows for and encourages exploration of this relationship.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

RESEARCH QUESTION

Every time we ask a question of anything, however basic, that question is conceived and framed in the intention and understanding of the questioner. Van Manen suggests that the “questions themselves and the way one understands the questions are the important starting point” of any research construction (Van Manen, 1990, p. 1). Van Manen's idea was central to the evolution and implementation of the project throughout all of the stages, and is explored at different points throughout this chapter. Clearly it means that what I bring to the research and how I have been in it, my personal understanding, is at the heart of methodology and method consideration and implementation. My central, fundamental underlying assumption to the research question was that transformative experiences happen in nature. This assumption was initially arrived at as a result of my own experience: the literature reviewed showed me that other people have also had transformative experiences in nature. It was a desire to explore these experiences and expand awareness and understanding of them that formed the initial catalyst for the project. Therefore, the focus of the question was to find out more about what transformative experiences in nature were like through focusing on detailed descriptions of the experiences, their meaning and contexts; whether there were shared qualities across experiences and whether there were differences and how experiences might be related to psychotherapy and counselling practice. In short, I wanted to know more about a particular part of life that I had experienced, and had heard anecdotally other people had experienced, as being transformative and therapeutic.

CONSIDERING METHOD

The process of considering a method was largely based around the best fit for the research question and the aims and intentions of the project. Research is approached either from a qualitative or a quantitative framework (Robson, 2002). Qualitative research sets out to explore, richly describe and interpret an experience or entity whereas quantitative research is more concerned with measuring and evaluating such experience, though often facets of each approach cross over into the other on at least a minor scale (ibid). This enquiry was therefore suggestive of a qualitative nature, since it was concerned with detailed description and illuminating the quality and texture of the experience, rather than an analysis of the rate of incidence or measurement of intensity, or other statistical generalization more suggestive of a quantitative approach (ibid). The project methodology was grounded in the assumptions and understandings of a social constructionist approach to making sense of human experience and living. In such an approach meanings, identities and experiences are considered intersubjective and historically and culturally contextualized as opposed to being thought of as objective and externally observable (Etherington, 2004). Given the research question and its aims, I began to focus on an overall phenomenological approach, focussing on detailed accounts of first-person life experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990).

INTRODUCING PHENOMENOLOGY

The principles of phenomenology are based on Husserl's proposition that "scientific investigation is arrived at through descriptions that make possible an understanding of the meanings and essences of experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84). Phenomenology is an approach to research based on studying experience *as it is lived* and exploring what it means to be human (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9-12). The principles of phenomenology underline much of the practice of existential therapy and include putting aside prior assumptions, focusing on

description rather than explanation, and attempting to equalize all aspects of experience in order to facilitate enquiry with as little enquirer bias as possible (Spinelli, 2007, p. 115 – 117). Using a phenomenological approach to investigation offered a sound fit with both the aim of understanding the phenomenon of healing in nature from an existential stance, and with my therapeutic training and approach to inter-relational dialogue. Returning to Van Manen's (1990) suggestion that “questions themselves and the way one understands the questions are the important starting point” of any research construction I began to focus in more detail on considering the particular phenomenological method that would be most suited to the project and my understanding of it (ibid, p. 1). I arrived at a decision to use an heuristic method - the process and central considerations involved in arriving at this decision are outlined further below.

CHOICE OF METHOD

Husserl was the founder of phenomenology: writing in 1931 he described his proposed way of looking at the world:

"We shall start from the standpoint of everyday life, from the world as it confronts us, from consciousness as it presents itself in psychological experience, and shall lay bare the presumptions essential to this viewpoint".

(Husserl, 1931, p. 3)

Discussing a phenomenological approach, Husserl suggested:

"To move freely along this new way without ever reverting to the old viewpoints, to learn to see what stands before our eyes, to distinguish, to describe, calls, moreover, for exacting and laborious studies".

(ibid)

Such studies were outlined by Husserl and involved a series of phenomenological reductions that have influenced and developed present-day approaches to phenomenological research. Husserl believed that a person's experience *is* reality, he did not hold the belief that there was anything underneath experience requiring investigation. He proposed that psychology is the "science of experience" (ibid); the study of realities where psychological phenomenon are real events "in so far as they have real existence (Dasein)" (ibid). In contrast to this *psychological phenomenology*, Husserl suggested that:

"pure or transcendental phenomenology will be established not as a science of facts, but as a science of essential being (as "eidetic" science); a science which aims exclusively at establishing "knowledge of essences" (Wesenserkenntnisse) and absolutely no "facts".

(ibid, p. 4)

Husserl believed that psychological experience, human reality, and the meanings that are integral to that experience should be the focus of investigation in psychological phenomenology. It is worth noting in relation to this approach to phenomenology that the study of meaning refers to the study of meaning *as it is part of the experience*, rather than meaning that is constructed outside of the experience or imposed onto the experience after the fact, or reality. My understanding of this as applied to research is that there is a level of interpretation of experience that happens as part of the phenomenon rather than as imposed to it, that the very process of consciously engaging in the world contains within it an interpretive function.

Phenomenological research involves exploring our lived experience in the world and Van Manen suggests,

"to know the world is profoundly to be in the world in a certain way, the act of researching - questioning - theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better to become the world"

(Van Manen, 1990, p. 5)

It is this inseparable connection that is referred to as intentionality (ibid).

Within phenomenological research there are various approaches that have grown out of differing assumptions, beliefs and attitudes relating to the meaning of experience and how it can be studied (Finlay, 2011). Two main distinguishable approaches to phenomenology are hermeneutic and transcendental. Broadly speaking, hermeneutic phenomenology is usually considered to focus on the interpretation of lived experience whereas transcendental phenomenology focuses on "transcending the perspective of human consciousness" in order to view the "world as a pure essential consciousness" (ibid, p. 68). Transcendental research does not have the interpretive focus of hermeneutics, placing more value on suspending individual beliefs or interpretations in order to arrive at a description of essential experience, of course with the assumption that *there is* an essence. On the other hand, a hermeneutic approach is focussed less on pure description and more on the meaning and interpretation of the experience.

These two approaches to some extent seem rather distinct and somewhat in opposition to each other when I encountered them initially, and I struggled with my own internal arguments concerned with whether experience has an essence other than what it is. I knew that I valued my experience within the research, and I also struggled against the idea that it is even possible to truly bracket self-experience in the way that I felt was implied in a transcendental approach. During the process of arriving at a method for the research I encountered Etherington's (2004) writings and was particularly informed by her focus on

reflexivity in research design and implementation. This helped me to explore further the method that felt a good fit for this particular research question. Gendlin's (2004) description of "Thinking at the Edge" informed a commitment to stay with experiences that might seem confused or ineffable. His writing on the felt sense and focussing (1961) were particularly relevant in terms of choosing the methodology, since my interpretation of Van Manen's idea that the way one understands the questions is an important starting point focussed on a more embodied felt sense of 'knowing' than that of pure reason or cognitive knowledge (Van Manen, 1990). So while I approached methodological considerations from an analytical perspective, I also considered my felt sense and more experiential understanding of what would be an appropriate fit. I decided that Moustakas' heuristic methodology best matched the overall aims and intentions of the project (Moustakas, 1990).

The Heuristic research method is a process of exploratory open-ended self-enquiry in order to discover and illuminate personal meaning (ibid, p. 15). The word heuristic is derived from "the Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning to discover or to find" (ibid, p. 9). Moustakas' heuristic research methodology is a phenomenological process of "through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis" (ibid). The philosophy of heuristic research is based on the assumption that "an unshakeable connection exists between what is out there, in its appearance and reality, and what is within me in reflective thought, feeling and awareness." (ibid, p. 12). Returning to my appreciation of Husserl's description that the very process of consciously engaging in the world contains within it an interpretive function, and my reticence to wholly embrace a more transcendental understanding, an heuristic method acknowledged clearly my part in being at the heart of understanding the phenomenon, as experienced by myself and my research participants, and I felt more comfortable with what I felt was a greater transparency. In short, it would have been disingenuous of me to have

followed a method that assumed a greater level of distinction between phenomenon and researcher and would also have thwarted my experience of the phenomenon as it arose.

The development of heuristic methodology is founded in a broad spectrum of researchers' and writers' ideas including Gendlin's (1962) work on the meaning of experiential encounter; Polyani's account of the tacit element (1966); Rogers' work on human science (1969) and Buber's (1937) writings on "dialogue and mutuality" (Moustakas 1990, p. 9). While the overarching methodology approach was heuristic, research participant interview transcripts were analysed using Moustakas' modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of phenomenological data analysis: detailed below in 'Project Approach and Design' (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121-122). The focus on description and meaning in the Moustakas modification of the method was largely compatible with both with the research aims and intentions and with an heuristic structure (I have outlined how this was implemented later in this chapter). I chose to employ this more structured data analysis of the transcripts to give myself a transparent anchor in the research. This grounding point was personally important in maintaining my focus in the context of an heuristic methodology which is highly reflexive.

PROJECT APPROACH AND DESIGN

The design of the project was founded on Moustakas' heuristic approach to research (Moustakas, 1990). It focussed on mine and research participants' experiences of healing, therapeutic transformation and self-awareness in relation to being in nature. Figure 1. 'Heuristic Methodology: Research Project Design' is my personal understanding of this process represented in a diagram form that I created. It provides my outline of the overall structure which I then go on to describe in detail.

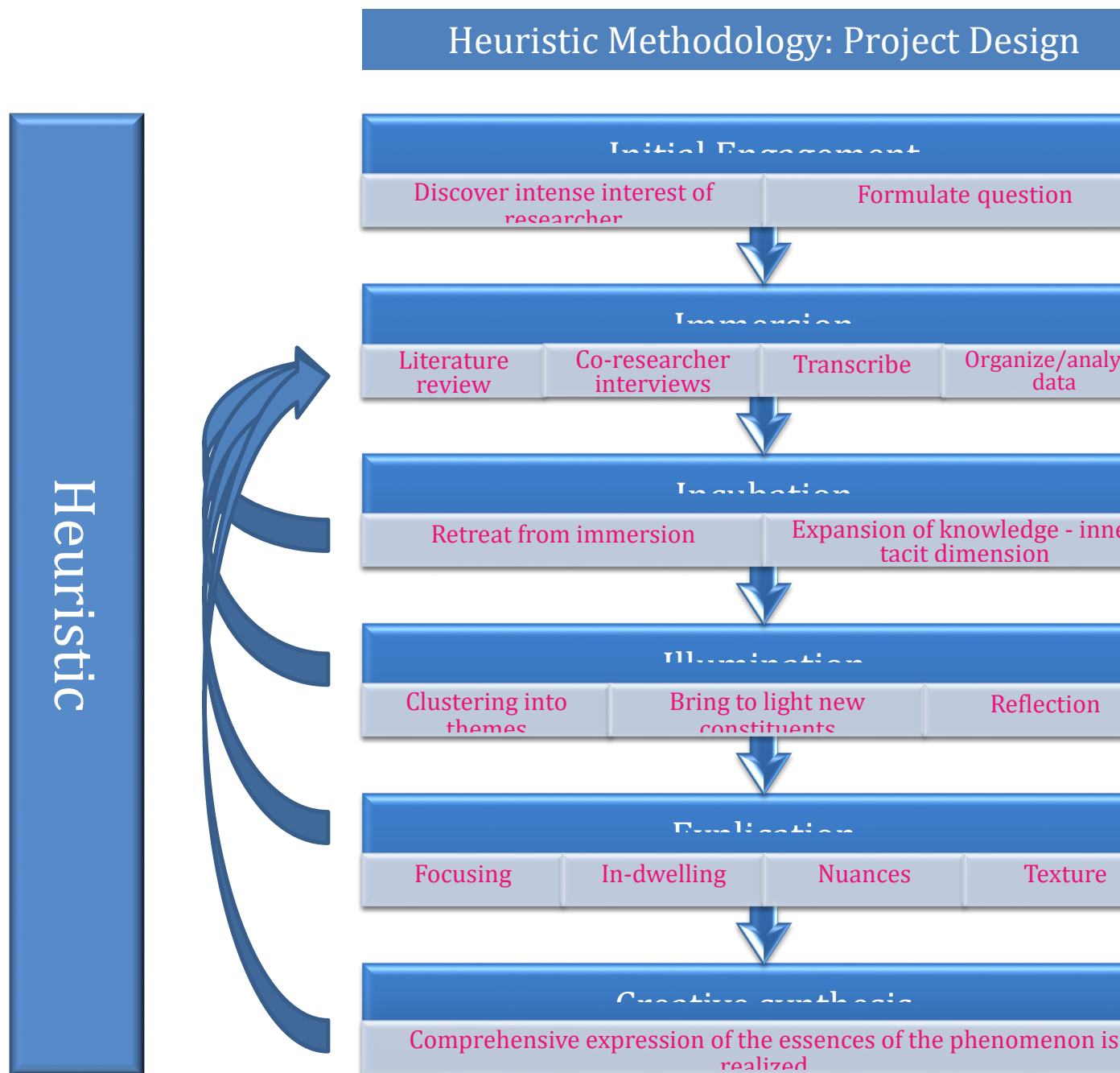


Figure 1. 'Heuristic Methodology: Research Project Design', Charlotte Macgregor, 2011

As detailed above, this relational, connected approach to research fitted well with the content and focus of this research, particularly in terms of the question being born from my own experience. Overall, choosing such an approach represented my personal commitment to be

involved at the heart of the research, rather than assuming a position outside of the phenomenon. The processes of heuristic research are outlined by Moustakas (ibid) and key phases are outlined in 'Figure 1. Heuristic Methodology: Project Design' and described in detail below after first reflecting on issues of validity in heuristic research.

HEURISTIC RESEARCH: VALIDITY

Validity is used to measure whether research is deemed “accurate, or correct, or true” (Robson, 2002: p. 70). In heuristic research, truth and validity are not constructed as external, objective measurements. Beginning with question construction and continuing throughout the project, heuristic validation is concerned with ensuring that description of the experience fits “comprehensively, vividly and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 32). At the beginning of the project, I spent a substantial period of time formulating the research and coming to an understanding and awareness of what it was that seemed to be urging me towards exploration. In some ways this was the most difficult part of the research process in terms of validity, since without accurately reflecting my experience of the phenomenon in the question I would have thwarted the extent to which I could illuminate it. Heuristic validity entails an impassioned, ethical and moral integrity in the person of the primary researcher. As the primary researcher, throughout the project I sought advice and guidance from my supervisor in a much more sustained and repeated way than I might have done in a different kind of academic study, primarily to ensure that I was maintaining the highest level of integrity and rigour. This continued and sustained dialogue and reflection was a prerequisite of staying true to the research question and the phenomenon through a process Moustakas described as at times transformative and at times painful - a sentiment that I would agree with (Moustakas, 1990). At each stage of the research I continually reflected on my own experience in order to check whether my analysis and findings resonated and fitted

with the experience of the phenomenon. During the interviews, at times where I was unsure about what was being said by a research participant I asked for clarity and voiced my uncertainty. I also reflected back my understanding of what was being described in the interview in order to validate the experience. All research participants were provided with their individual transcripts and with the individual stage of the findings to reflect on. Throughout the analysis process each statement in each stage of the transcript was documented with line number and transcript number. This proved very useful in terms of validation when I felt unsure and needed to check back with a previous stage or reconnect with the wider context of the experience.

PHASES OF HEURISTIC RESEARCH

INITIAL ENGAGEMENT

The initial engagement involved extensive self-dialogue and communication as well as wide-ranging consideration of how the topic broadly fits into the theory and practice of existential therapy. This was a time of a slow realisation and unfolding of how important my relationship with nature is and has been, and the extent to which this has been transformative for me. It was from this increasing awareness that I began to formulate the research question, though this was by no means an easy process and involved a great deal of supervisory encouragement for me to trust in my own experiential awareness. The methodology and method choices previously outlined were also born from this initial engagement, since gradually appreciating my personal connection with the research question as it became clearer steered me in these considerations.

IMMERSION

Following the discovery and clarification of the research topic and question, I lived the question through immersion throughout my life. In heuristic research, the primary researcher

is alert to “all possibilities for meaning and enters fully into life with others wherever the theme is being expressed” (ibid, p. 28). For this project, during the immersion stage I undertook self-dialogue immersion into my experience of wild natural environments using focusing techniques outlined by Gendlin (2003) to explore self experience of being in nature. Immersion also included focussing on this topic in individual therapy, in journal writings and informal dialogues with people experiencing connection in nature.

The immersion stage included formulating ethical documentations and obtaining ethical approval, which was granted by Middlesex University (see below); the literature review; me being interviewed by my therapist to capture and describe my personal experience of the phenomenon; obtaining informed consent from research participants; research participant interviewing; and transcribing, organizing and analysing data using the modification of the Colaizzi method (described in Phenomenological interviews: Data Analysis). The immersion phase is the core body of the research which the other stages rested on and repeatedly returned to. The phases of incubation; illumination; explication and creative synthesis all involved on-going reflection and circular feedback to the immersion phase. This was to ensure that the presentation of data accurately reflected the descriptive experiences of me and the research participants and to routinely and repeatedly consider the relationship between these experiences and the literature.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND INFORMED CONSENT

Part of receiving ethical approval (see Appendix A: Ethical Documents) involved preparing detailed research information sheets and forms in order to obtain written consent, which I obtained prior to each interview. It was important for me to reiterate to research participants throughout the project that consent was on-going, and during the interview and after the interview I highlighted this. All interview data was anonymous, including places or any potentially identifying features, and I specifically informed research participants that if there

was anything that they said during the interview that they decided they did not want in the research they just had to let me know. I also sent copies of the anonymous transcripts to all of the research participants along with the individual findings.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEWS WITH 8 RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Meetings of between 45 minutes and one hour were conducted with research participants who had had strong transformative experiences in nature. Interviews took place over several months during the immersion phase. I was also interviewed by my personal therapist during this phase. Research participants were recruited through contact with organizations such as National Mountain Centres in Wales and Scotland, Sailing and Climbing bodies, Outdoors Yoga Organizations, Mountain Rescue Organizations, Mountain Leader Groups, Outwards bound/activity centres, psychotherapy training institutions, ecotherapy organizations and higher and further educational institutions. Advertisements were placed with these organizations as well as in walking and mountain forums, in psychotherapy journals and with organizations such as Long-Distance Walkers Association. The central tenet for selection was that research participants expressed that they had 'strong transformative experiences' of being in relation to the natural world. Adverts and supporting documentation included a description of the aims and objectives of the project.

Recruitment and selection was made by me, informed and supported by academic supervision, and focussed on the initial detail and strength of the transformative experience, as well as on initial general questions and informal discussions to rule out experiences that might have involved drug or alcohol intoxication and to evaluate openness to discuss and explore the phenomenon. I had an extremely encouraging response to my advertisements for research participants and could have filled the available places on the first day of recruiting. However, as I did some background research on potential research participants I realised that there was a particularly strong response from one particular ecotherapy group. For this reason

I waited until I had had responses from across the range of advertisements and also re-advertised in non-ecotherapy arenas. From taking part in some of the ecotherapy forums I also realized that there was a bias against this research for its human-centric stance, and a feeling that I had not yet 'seen the environmental light' by wanting to focus on human transformation rather than a more environmental perspective. Part of my initial telephone screening conversations were focused on my evaluation of how open the individuals were to talk about the phenomenon and how this balanced with any strong theoretical stances, whatever the modality or theoretical perspective of the person. Selection did not focus on any particular demographic: the aim of the project was to describe and shed light on transformative experiences. Recruitment policy for research participants was inclusive in order to be as open as possible to any experience of the phenomenon. Initial descriptions of the transformative nature of experiences, by potential research participants, were the principle point of selection. Selection also considered the ability of the research participant to articulate the experience, and their willingness to make the commitment and be part of the research. In total 16 potential research participants expressed came forward to request being involved in the research:

- Three were from walking and outdoor activity organizations, one of which was included in the research;
- Five were from three different higher education institutions of which three were selected;
- Four were from ecotherapy or ecopsychology groups of which two were selected;
- Four were from therapy and psychology organizations of which two were selected.

An information sheet (see Appendix B Information for Researchers) was written in order to inform research participants of the research design, process and what was to be expected

from being involved in the research. The research participants ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-60s and had a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds in nature. Three of the participants, including myself, had experience in endurance sports in nature, one had been in nature as part of an ecotherapy course, one had been travelling, one had been on a retreat, two lived close to nature and one in the city. Transformative experiences were described across a very broad range of nature and across continents, from beaches, to snowy mountains, in both forests and the expansive plains of the U.S.A.

INTERVIEW METHOD

Interviews focussed on the research question and the research participants' experiences in relation to the phenomenon. They were conducted according to the principles of phenomenology outlined by Spinelli (2007) and Moustakas (1994). Moustakas proposes that a conversational, dialogue-based interview is the style most consistent with heuristic research, rather than working from a pre-defined set of questions (Moustakas, 1990, p. 47). I followed a dialogue-based style, using a set of guideline questions in order to try and put the phenomenon into some kind of context. My approach to interviewing was reflexive: as Moustakas writes:

“In heuristic interviewing, the data generated is dependent upon accurate, empathic listening; being open to oneself and the primary researcher; being flexible and free to vary procedures to respond to what is required in the flow of dialogue; and being skilful in creating a climate that encourages the research participant to respond comfortably, accurately, comprehensively, and honestly in elucidating the phenomenon”

(ibid, p. 48).

While I developed a set of questions relevant to the project's aims, these formed a loose backdrop, rather than a set procedure. The following list of questions was a flexible guide to the areas of dialogue that were the focus of the interviews with research participants:

- Can you describe the context of your experience of strong transformation in nature?
- Where were you? What were you doing?
- Can you describe the actual experience?
- What was the experience like physically?
- What was the experience like emotionally?
- Are there any particular people or events associated with the experience?
- What meaning or sense, if any, do you make of the experience?
- Was this an isolated experience?
- If this was not an isolated experience, can you describe something of the frequency of these experiences?
- Has this impacted on your life since, and if so, could you describe how?
- Have you had a similar kind of experience in a different environment or situation?
- What qualities or dimensions of your experience in nature stand out for you?
- What feelings and thoughts are generated as you describe the experience?
- Is there anything else that feels significant or relevant that has not been shared?

As this research was conceived from my experience of the phenomenon, I was interviewed by my therapist for the first interview. Although this first part of data collection was distinctly different from the subsequent interviews with research participants, because I was interviewee rather than interviewer, the analysis of data (as described below) had resonances with a pilot analysis. Reflecting on my experience of being interviewed was helpful in terms of becoming more aware of how different questions and dialogue helped facilitate exploration

of the phenomenon. My interviewer, my personal therapist, was given the list of outline questions, though there was less focus on these questions than on the interviews that I conducted. Partly this was a result of our long-standing relationship and because I had previously talked to her about these experiences. In my planning of this research I was aware that sometimes using a personal therapist as an interviewer is considered as crossing a boundary, so this was an area that I reflected on with my primary supervisor and in therapy. All parties were comfortable with it, particularly since it meant being able to have someone that I already trusted conduct my research interview, because of her in-depth study and appreciation of phenomenology, and because I had already explored this phenomenon in therapy I was able to reach a deeper connection and awareness of my experience.

As the interviewee, I was able to appreciate the research process from the perspective of being immersed in my own experience, and I particularly appreciated moments of clarification and reflection that helped me focus on the nuances of the texture of the experience. An example of this sort of expansive clarification is provided from Transcript 1. Writing in italics is my therapist's voice interviewing me; my voice is in non-italics and numbers are line numbers from the original transcript.

Transcript 1

66 *I'm, I'm interested, in one of the first things you said when you were describing it*
67 *was the quality of the light, and how everything....was clear and sharp, you know, I*
68 *can almost picture it myself....*

69 Yeah

70 *really glowing colours.... and that you know you feel sh-arper somehow in that.*

71 yes, clarity of what, what's important.. or... it feels quite ... I feel quite spiritually
72 connected in... some way. I don't understand that..... but something....

Between lines 66-72 the interviewer, my therapist, spent time reflecting descriptions that I had made earlier and this helped me begin to move towards opening up areas that seemed

more difficult to clarify and understand (lines 71-72). In the eight interviews that followed I was the interviewer of the research participants. All research participants were people that were previously unknown to me, with one exception whom I had met previously in professional context. The experience of interviewing was distinctly different from therapy, even though to some extent both rest on phenomenological exploration. The distinct difference was based around my agenda of maintaining focus on a particular phenomenon. At times it was difficult to return to focus on the phenomenon when my research participants were describing powerful experiences of grief. However, it was often these difficult and painful moments that were particular central to the experience of the phenomenon, giving the interviews and the data a notable depth and richness. Given both the focus and standalone nature of the interviews, I was cautious about opening up material that was painful. Having the outline questions helped greatly with helping me keep to the phenomenon.

INTERVIEW LOCATIONS

Interviews were conducted at various locations agreed between both parties. Some interviews were conducted over Skype following a request by a participant from another country to be part of the research. Ethical approval for using Skype was secured as an amendment to initial ethical approval. On reflection, using Skype did not seem to change the process or outcome of interviewing, though it did impact very slightly on the relationship built with research participants after the interview in terms of having dialogue once the initial formal interview had finished. For example, after I had finished recording and switched the tape off, the conversations ended more quickly on Skype whereas in the face to face interviews there tended to be more informal conversations. I wondered if these would hinder the subsequent participation in the research, particularly in reading through and confirming individual findings, though this was not the case.

TRANSCRIPTION

All interviews were transcribed personally by me, no voice recognition software was used. Transcriptions were typically begun within 24 hours of interviewing: this ensured that the memory and feel of the interview were easy to recall when questions of meaning or emphasis were raised. As part of the transcription I noted key non-verbal moments - recall of non-verbal was also aided by the short gap between interviewing and transcription.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEWS: DATA ANALYSIS

Moustakas' modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis was used to analyse the transcripts of the research participant interviews (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121-122).

The steps, summarised from Moustakas' outline, are:

1. "Obtain a phenomenological description of the experience (for example, the interview transcript).
2. From the transcript, complete the following:
 - a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience
 - b. Document all relevant statements
 - c. Catalogue each non-repetitive statement: these are the invariant horizons/meaning units
 - d. Cluster these meaning units into themes
 - e. Synthesize these invariant meaning units and themes into descriptions of the texture of the experience, including verbatim illustrations
 - f. Reflect on the description
 - g. Compose a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience.
3. Complete the above steps for all research participants

4. From the individual accounts, construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual accounts into a universal description representing the group as a whole. " (ibid)

Step 2 G and Step 4 both refer to the 'meaning and essences' of the experiences, and I gradually came to realise during the later stages of analysis that I was focussed more towards description of the *meaning* of transformative experiences in nature. Through focussing on the textural-structural description of the meaning of the descriptions I began to move towards the more universal descriptions detailed in the findings.

THE TRANSCRIPT ANALYSIS PROCESS

Each stage of analysis using the Moustakas modification of the Colaizzi methodology was saved in a different file, so that each of the transcript stages exists as a standalone document. The beginning of each interview analysis was a period of immersion in the tape, followed by a period of initial immersion in the transcript. This involved reading and re-reading, and only moving onto the first stage of analysis after this period felt settled. Although these interviews and analysis are part of the immersion stage of the Heuristic design, to some extent each interview in the individual analysis process became an individual project with its own phases of immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis within the greater whole. Each step of the individual transcript analysis is considered below. The final stage involving the description of the phenomenon across the research participants is outlined in the final stage of the heuristic process, the creative synthesis.

STEP A

"Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience"

During this phase I read through the document and reflected on whether each statement related to the phenomenon. I used coloured highlighting for this, so that I could make

amendments if I changed my mind. For example, this is an extract from Transcript 1, showing in blue the statements that were considered significant:

Transcript 1: Step A

111 Because it feels like something really precious, a really precious feeling, that I
112 almost..... almost like a, a there are very.... It's a relationship that I know I will
113 have that feeling in. You know, I know that if I go right now and I go to, drive to
114 the Hill and I walk up the Hill that in an hour's time I will feel like that.

Some statements were relatively easy to mark as relevant or not, others less so. At this stage I erred on the side of caution and marked statements as relevant where in doubt. I also returned to the recordings several times to reflect on non-verbal nuances, intonation and pitch, particularly where a statement was ambiguous.

STEP B

"Document all relevant statements"

This process flowed rather seamlessly from Step A, and was more of an administrative process of cataloguing statements with codes for line and transcript numbers. This stage did require critical consideration of where to divide statements, since often statements were related to each other and immediate context. Initially, on the analysis of my transcript, I documented statements on a line by line basis, and realised that this sometimes detracted from understanding the meaning: for example, in my interview analysis

Transcript 1: Step B

5.... feeling at home. (t1. 10)

6.... connected to something. (t1.12)

7 and the other is a sort of expansive feel. Going outside of myself. T1.17-18)

8 grounded in something (t1.20).

Relevant Statements 5 and 6, in the above example from the transcript were taken too much out of context and I had to return to the original transcript to reconnect them with their context and meaning. So I revised this approach to a) include surrounding statements and b) not break down meaning statements into constituent parts until a much later stage of analysis. The following extract provides an example of this. Text in *Italics* is my voice as researcher; the number at the beginning of the line is the number in order of the statement and the number at the end of each statement refers to transcript number and line number. These were kept throughout the analysis to allow a transparent reference process back to the original document.

Transcript 3. Step B

16. *so it throws everything, it throws normal, more usual ideas up in the air in some way...Yes, yes, so it means that then I'm effectively co-constructing my world from scratch,* (T3. 218-220)

17. it's an awarenessI can construct and interpret this world very differently. And I can construct and interpret my sort of being in that world in a very, very different way.it's a reframe and it's a dance, it's a skip. [running outside] (T3. 223-228)

33.In an outdoor environment, stuff that you might deem as being negative suddenly is put back into perspective. It's that much harder in that environment to get cross about the insignificant, or unhappy about the insignificant. (T3. 381-382)

34.I think there is this grounding or perspective of being in nature, urm, that -is very, very helpful, very useful... (T3. 405-406)

35.... you give yourself space, and we're lucky enough here to have some space, and if you have space outside, it just starts to become an easier... those minor irritants, or what might be minor irritants, become more manageable. (T3. 417-419)

STEP C

"Catalogue each non-repetitive statement: these are the invariant horizons/meaning units"

This phase of analysis evolved out of Step B and was a process of looking at each statement in relation to similar statements to reflect on whether it was a repetition or not. Again I erred on the side of caution so that if there was a slight variation I catalogued each separate statement.

STEP D

"Cluster these meaning units into themes"

This process required a great deal of time and reflection, becoming immersed in the data, then spending periods of time with a more reflective period of incubation and then returning to a period of immersion again. Initially I physically laid out all of the meaning units into a giant jigsaw, seeing how things fitted with each, whether there was enough similarity for a theme to emerge or not. I began this process with an initial word search, for example looking at meaning statements containing a key word, and this provided an initial, rather limited clustering. However, this proved very basic and sometimes did not match the felt sense of my experience of the phenomenon, hence the process of returning to immersion. Sometimes the same statement linked into different themes, and was therefore placed in multiple clusters. An Example is provided here that shows how the statements above from Transcript 3 were clustered into two themes of 'Transforming the Everyday' and 'Perspective Shift'.

Transcript 3. Step D

Transforming the Everyday

1 *so it throws everything, it throws normal, more usual ideas up in the air in some way...*

When J is in nature he feels that everyday, normal ideas are thrown up in the air, and he

is "effectively co-constructing my world from scratch", that he is able to reframe how he sees life - that his running becomes dancing, for example (T3. 218-220/ T3. 223-228)

- 2 Being in nature increases his awareness that many of the rules of living are social conventions (T3. 268-283)

Perspective Shift

- 1 In nature, parts of life that might be deemed as being negative are put back into perspective. "It's that much harder in that environment to get cross about the insignificant, or unhappy about the insignificant" (T3. 381-382)
- 2 There is a "grounding or perspective of being in nature, urm, that is very, very helpful, very useful..." (T3. 405-406)
- 3 Minor irritants become more manageable when J feels that he has enough outside space. (T3. 417-419)

STEP E

"Synthesize these invariant meaning units and themes into descriptions of the texture of the experience, including verbatim illustrations"

This period was more of a reflective process than the intense immersion of the previous stage. At times I returned to the original transcripts to refer to the context to ensure accurate description. The example detailed above becomes:

Transcript 3. Step E

Transforming the Everyday

When J is in nature he feels that everyday, normal ideas are thrown up in the air, and he is "effectively co-constructing my world from scratch", that he is able to reframe how he sees life - that his running becomes dancing, for example (T3. 218-220/ T3. 223-228). More

normal usual ideas and conventions are thrown around. Being in nature increases his awareness that many of the rules of living are social conventions.

Transforming Perspective

J's perspective on what is negative changes in nature and minor irritations become much more manageable. "It's that much harder in that environment to get cross about the insignificant, or unhappy about the insignificant" (T3. 381-382). J experienced a "grounding or perspective of being in nature, urm, that is very, very helpful, very useful..." (T3. 405-406).

STEP F

"Reflect on the Description"

This stage involved a period of concentrated focussing on the results of the previous stage in what felt like an almost meditative way. I relied on my knowledge and previous sustained immersion and reflection and tacit understanding. In the file for the stage I noted all my comments in a different colour so that I was aware of what was my voice. I noticed that often in the transcripts my reflection on the research participant's experience was voiced during the interview as I helped the research participant talk about their experience of the phenomenon. In the example below, the purple voice is my reflection and this also relates to putting this description in the context of the whole - there was an inter-linking between this data and my immersion in the other themes. Part of this reflection also involved considering whether distinct ideas shared similarities and should be merged into one theme, or whether they needed separating out into further themes. In the example below I felt that there was a primary theme of transforming perspective that encapsulated both of those from the earlier stages.

Transforming Perspective

J's perspective on what is negative changes in nature and minor irritations become much more manageable. "It's that much harder in that environment to get cross about the insignificant, or unhappy about the insignificant" (T3. 381-382). J experienced a "grounding or perspective of being in nature, urm, that is very, very helpful, very useful..." (T3. 405-406).

When J is in nature he feels that every day, normal ideas are thrown up in the air, and he is "effectively co-constructing my world from scratch", that he is able to reframe how he sees life - that his running becomes dancing, for example (T3. 218-220/ T3. 223-228). More normal usual ideas and conventions are thrown around. Being in nature increases his awareness that many of the rules of living are social conventions. When J is out on long runs in nature, he is more comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty.

Being open to uncertainty and ambiguity is part of the transformation of the shift in perspective of what matters and what doesn't. It is also related to being more present. J is in tune with himself through being in nature. His happiness, contentment and calmness seem to spring from being where he feels he is meant to be. He smiles, he cries he expresses his felt experience as it arises through being in relationship.

STEP G

"Compose a Textural-Structural Description of the Meaning and Essence of the Experience"

This phase was a culmination of all of the previous stages. During this composition I continuously returned to the verbatim to ensure as far as possible that I was not introducing something into the description that was not described by the research participant. If in doubt, I stayed with the verbatim quote. This stage was also done in two parts, the first was to integrate the reflection (purple voice) into the individual descriptions as shown here, and the second was to focus on the whole experience and present the themes together.

Transforming Perspective

J's perspective on what is negative changes in nature and minor irritations become much more manageable. "It's that much harder in that environment to get cross about the insignificant, or unhappy about the insignificant" (T3. 381-382). J experienced a "grounding or perspective of being in nature, urm, that is very, very helpful, very useful..." (T3. 405-406).

When J is in nature he feels that every day, normal ideas are thrown up in the air, and he is "effectively co-constructing my world from scratch", that he is able to reframe how he sees life - that his running becomes dancing, for example (T3. 218-220/ T3. 223-228). More normal usual ideas and conventions are thrown around. Being in nature increases his awareness that many of the rules of living are social conventions.

When J is out on long runs in nature, he is more comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. Being open to uncertainty and ambiguity is part of the transformation of the shift in perspective of what matters and what doesn't. It is also related to being more present. J is in tune with himself through being in nature. His happiness, contentment and calmness seem to spring from being where he feels he is meant to be. He smiles, he cries he expresses his felt experience as it arises through being in relationship.

In some examples, such as the one above, there was little addition or deletion of either the reflective voice or description and this process was relatively smooth. In some transcripts this stage took much longer and I had a sense of unease of the reflection not fitting, or of the description not completely representing the phenomenon, and this involved returning to the earlier stages and the transcripts for reflection and validation.

INCUBATION

Following the sustained period of immersion, I entered into a period of incubation during which withdrawal from the intense experience of immersion occurred.

“Although the researcher is moving on a totally different path, detached from involvement with the question and removed from awareness of its nature and meanings, on another level expansion of knowledge is taking place” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28).

Growth took place through “the inner tacit dimension” (ibid) during which intuitive awareness enabled clarification and extended understandings “outside the immediate awareness” (ibid, 27). In the structure and diagram presented earlier, I had planned and expected the interviewing, transcribing and analysis to fall within the immersion phase. In reality I went backwards and forwards between immersion and incubation phases and these stages were not at all the linear process that I had anticipated. To a large extent I was lead by the data and my experience, and felt little control over how enduring these phases were. I had planned my study so that this period of research happened after I had finished the rest of my doctorate commitments and this provided me with the flexibility and time to be able to focus intensely on the phenomenon, the fluid process and what seemed important at each particular time. At times I retreated from periods of intense immersion into incubation where I was aware of some sort of processing in the background, spending time still focussed on the research but perhaps on a less intense, more administrative part of the project. Again, I was very much guided by my holistic experience of the phenomenon rather than by an artificially imposed plan or structure. During the analysis of Transcript 9, for example, I was aware of trying to remain in the immersion phase in the midst of aiming to get to know the transcript and of feeling rather stuck. I retreated for a while into a period of incubation and realised after a few days that the stuck feeling was my feeling uncomfortable with a particular experience of the phenomenon that I could not understand and had not experienced. Part of this incubation process was then focussed around reflecting on my own assumptions until I started to feel more fluid understanding with the Transcript. During this phase I relied heavily

on the practices that I use in my psychotherapy supervision in terms of being aware of my relational process and experience.

ILLUMINATION

The illumination phase was a process of awakening to new constituents of the phenomenon and a “clustering of qualities into themes inherent in the question” (ibid). This process involved bringing to light new areas and also modifying previous meanings. During this stage, when new areas came to light, or previous meanings were modified, I returned to the immersion phase to reflect on how new meaning related to other areas, such as the literature and other descriptive accounts of the phenomenon. The illumination process required both active reflection and the appreciation of tacit processes to elucidate essences. Moustakas described how this period of heuristic research involved the illumination of “missed, misunderstood, or distorted realities that make their appearance and add something essential to the truth of an experience” (ibid). During this time I returned to some of the literature that I had previously reviewed and experienced a different, more experiential understanding with some of the writings than the more intellectual understanding that I had previously had. This helped me in turn appreciate the descriptions of the phenomenon in a new light - to some extent this phase merged into the explication phase and it was difficult to separate these two stages from each other.

EXPLICATION

Following illumination, I examined what was awakened into awareness to gain knowledge of the various intricate layers of meaning, for example the literature that I described above. A comprehensive explication involves seeing new themes or connections related to material and description from the immersion stage. A process of continually checking that any themes and connections were relevant to, and accurately reflected, descriptions of the phenomenon necessitated a process of returning to the descriptive accounts of earlier stages as well as the

literature. In Transcript 3, where the experience was part of endurance training and exercise, this involved returning to the transcript to reflect on where nature was positioned within the transformation. This involved a process of reflecting on and challenging my own assumptions. I realised that I had perceived running as a less embedded-in-nature activity than other ways of being in nature, such as walking or being still. During this part of the research process, I used focusing techniques, indwelling, self-searching, personal therapy and dialogues with my supervisors. Moustakas suggests that the two most important concepts “in explicating a phenomenon are focusing and indwelling”, where concentrated attention is given to creating an inward space and discovering nuances, textures, and constituents of the phenomenon which may then be more fully elucidated through in-dwelling” (ibid). As well as indwelling in the transcripts and the data I also returned to nature, to the sea and to long walks in order to focus which helped me make sense of and reconnect with my experience of the phenomenon rather than being completely absorbed in the analysis. This activity also helped me make sense on a more experiential level with the phenomenon: something about being outside in nature helped me connect to the research participant's experience of being in nature, even when the particular environment was often dramatically different.

CREATIVE SYNTHESIS

This is the phase where I placed the “core themes into creative synthesis” (ibid, p. 31). This involved moving between narrative descriptions, verbatim transcripts and creative expressions in order to ensure accurate representation. Preparatory steps that were at the core of this phase were the combination of knowledge of the data and “a period of solitude and meditation focusing on the topic and question” (ibid, p. 32). Final creative synthesis involved ensuring that the description reflected as accurately and authentically as possible what had been uncovered throughout the preceding stages. During this stage my focus moved towards the final stage of the transcript data analysis from the method outlined earlier:

"Construct a Textural-Structural Description of the Meanings of the Experience, Integrating all Individual Accounts into a Universal Description Representing the Group as a Whole".

Having completed all of the steps of the data analysis for each of the individual transcripts I began the process of organizing the data for the overall findings. Having been immersed in the powerful descriptions and diverse range of experiences of the phenomenon from the interviews, it felt important to me that each person's voice be heard as part of the whole. As well as this being out of respect for the person and their experiences, it also felt important to have an understanding of the context so that the reader is able to appreciate the experience more holistically in relation to life experiences. While the final step of the analysis stage suggests "Integrating all Individual Accounts into a Universal Description Representing the Group as a Whole", I felt that having a two-tiered findings where summaries of individual narrative experiences are followed by a more thematic account from across all of the research participants would not risk losing sight of the individual and context which are so integral to the phenomenon. Therefore the first part of the findings outlines the individual experiences of the phenomenon, allowing descriptions to arise from the narrative while the second part focuses on the themes that arise from the individual experiences. Some of these themes are experienced across all of the research participants, some are experienced by several or few, and some by just one research participant, although sometimes on multiple occasions: there are highlighted during the findings.

Returning once again to the suggestion that the “questions themselves and the way one understands the questions” is integral to any research construction, maintaining the *nature* and the *individual* in the formulation of the *transformative experience* fits most authentically with my understanding (Van Manen, 1990, p. 1). Indeed, to attempt to extract meaning out of context stands in contrast to some of the primary themes that have emerged from the descriptions, as I trust will become obvious as the Findings are unfolded. All individual

findings were sent to the research participants for validation and were received very positively with only very minor amendments, notably where a research participant felt uncomfortable with some verbatim and description. It was difficult for the research participant to pinpoint what this discomfort was about. This research participant was happy for this information to be included in the universal findings. Further reflection on the process of validation is included in the discussion.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

There are nine unique, individual accounts of transformative experience in nature that make up the total description of the phenomenon and which have formed the basis of the thematic analysis (to reiterate: pseudonyms are used throughout except for in the presentation of my personal findings; geographical details are appropriately changed to continue to reflect the physical environment in which the experience happened while ensuring confidentiality). These descriptions are based on a diverse range of encounters in nature. I will begin by offering an overview of each of the research participants' experiences beginning with the findings from my experience. The findings of the research participants are narrated in my words using verbatim descriptions obtained from the interview transcripts.

Following these descriptions, in the second part of the findings I will introduce the results of the analysis and discuss in detail the individual themes, looking at themes on the physical, social, personal and spiritual dimensions. Beginning with the individual overviews is central to the findings, since the person is integral to the experience of relationship with nature. Interviewing my research participants involved being in touch with powerful personal narratives. Hearing distilled versions of these whole accounts provides an understanding and

appreciation of the phenomenon, significant in its own right, and also frames and contextualises later discussion and subsequent analysis.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

During my interview with my therapist I described the powerful impact that nature has had on me throughout my life, particularly during the loss of someone very dear to me. Being in nature felt vital to my experience of grief when I lost someone close to me while I was staying in the mountains. I felt urgently drawn out into the wilderness of the mountain range, out into the snow. Nature helped me express and experience my pain and loss more fully and openly than I thought possible. Even in intense grief, being in nature helped me feel calmer and more peaceful, as if I was more in touch with a deeper holistic experience and able to accept how I felt without layers of 'shoulds' and 'oughts' smothering my experience. The physical experience of being nature was critical to the expansion of my embodied emotional awareness and restoring a mind/body equilibrium.

When I was in the mountains I experienced my grief as a catalyst for a renewed and sustained urgency to live more vitally and this experience was the foundation for major changes in my life over the following couple of years. I had a strong sense of understanding and accepting my feelings because of the connection I felt in the beauty of nature. I was only aware of this experience on reflection, it felt effortless at the time, a very real sense of being in the right place. My feelings seemed more fluid in nature, and I have felt this at other times since, particularly when facing personal difficulties and during challenging times.

At other times when I have been in nature, lying on the ground, on earth, rock, or grass, I have felt connected with something important, although I find this difficult to articulate and define and it leaves me feeling self-conscious and exposed. I am aware that I connect with, listen to and trust in my bodily feelings and experiences to a much greater extent in nature. My sometimes rigid, segmented self-critical voices are integrated and transformed into a greater level of embracing and enveloping self-acceptance and self-care.

Outside of my experience of grief in nature, on other occasions there is a dancing, energetic quality to some of my experience of this relationship, a sense of lightness and liberation. My felt sense of my emotions is deeper and lower in my body, relating again to a loss of judgemental self-talking based on social norms and self-expectations that allows me to be more in touch with my embodied experience. I value being in touch with my bodily rhythms when I am out walking, as opposed to the more normal social time structures, such as artificial mealtimes and bedtimes. This helped me feel a sense of being in harmony with my environment, a feeling of being at home. Emotionally, when I shut my eyes and sat still on rocks in the mountains I felt completely awakened to a broader, deeper and expansive aliveness, that felt like some sort of spiritual connection. This sense of looking outwards, towards and beyond the self remains a routine feeling of being in nature for me, at the same time as feeling solidly grounded in sensory and felt experience.

My relationship with nature feels trustful and dependable, reassuring and life-affirming as if increasing awareness of some essential presence. Nature had provided me with an emotional and existential metaphor of turbulent storms being weathered inside and out. Yet it also awakens other vulnerabilities – affirming death and the transitory quality of each moment.

My time focus shifts in nature and I have experienced letting go of what was outside of the moment, a present focus that seemed to happen without any effort in complete contrast with the effort I make to be like this to be more present in day to day life. I experienced a sense of stillness and being in time that felt special. Even in very difficult emotional feelings, I had a sense of wellbeing grounded in a feeling of “this is what I am right now” (T1.617). For example, I described standing on the edge of the cloud:

“I felt just right there, right in the, like right in the middle of some.... right at the heart of something and yet all of it at the same time. (T1. 271-272)”.

This moment was beautiful and energetic, it felt satisfying and enough. There was no need for anything other at that moment. It remains difficult for me to articulate how privileged I feel that my precious relationship with nature is, because it feels fundamental to my sense of self when I am in nature. I am more aware of my *place in time* in nature, the ancient, timeless quality of natural landscapes links me to people that I have lost, as well as to those that will be born. There is a sense of isolation and belonging that I experience as being held in tension. Watching the mist blowing over the barren landscape showed something of the constant, transitory evolution and connected me with a sense of profound loss. The poignant sadness in each goodbye, and the pain of each eventual end seemed echoed in every minute change as time passed, as if resonated in the constant evolution of the landscape.

I also feel that being in nature seems to throw my normal notions of ‘self’ on their head, questioning the boundaries between self and environment. At the same time as feeling deeply connected to nature, expanding into it, I have a deep and crucial realisation of an innate experience of self. I experience my relationship with the natural world as similar to a faith, since I trust in the experience yet without fully understanding. There is a sense of the ineffable.

When I return back from being in wild nature, particularly from being in mountains to a daily routine, something from the experience remains, so that I feel more self-aware and in touch with my felt experience in everyday life. Notions of comfort are challenged and expanded in nature and, at a particularly important moment of transformation in nature, I experienced a shift in not wanting to remain safely in my comfort zone. Being true to self experience seems to take precedence over being comfortable as a result of being in nature, in contrast to being inside. Nature seemed to point to authenticity in opposition to much of what I have experienced in society.

DOROTHY'S EXPERIENCE

Dorothy grew up in England and lived in the city, until she married an American man and moved to the U.S.A. She travelled from the East Coast to the West Coast of the U.S.A. by car, taking about two weeks to complete the journey. This experience became an integrated part of who she is now. It was during this time that Dorothy experienced her profound transformation in nature. She was in her mid to late twenties at the time of this experience. She is now in her sixties and this experience has stayed with her over this time. This experience changed her attitude to being inside, and she now experiences anxiety if she knows that she is going to be inside for extended periods of time. The period of camping outside was a pivot point in Dorothy's life. She described how there was life before and life after that time. Decades later, Dorothy still seems slightly overcome by how important her first trip camping was, and how her life might have been if she hadn't had this experience.

It took Dorothy and her husband two weeks to travel from the East Coast to the West Coast of the U.S.A. - this was a period of transformation. They decided that they would camp instead of stay in a motel. Dorothy described the newness of this experience, and how she was completely awestruck:

I had never seen vistas like that before because in England it had always been these little tiny vistas, you know, or English countryside. ... I was kind of awe struck. It was like 'Oh my goodness!'. (T6. 19-23)

At the same time as being awestruck she also felt afraid, particularly of being outside in a tent in bear territory. She lived outside for the majority of the two weeks, and by the time she reached her destination in San Francisco, she had what she described as:

"this epiphany, of like 'I don't want to live in a building!'. 'I don't want to', I didn't want to then go back now to living in buildings. I'd realised something profound had happened to me

in these two weeks of like living in a tent and having more access to the natural world. And I think that it was profound for me because, prior to that I'd not had that experience. (T6. 34-51)

This was new territory for her, both literally and metaphorically, opening her to a raw feeling of experience and a vibrant sense of being really alive.

Dorothy felt that the experience of camping out during this two weeks was almost childlike, akin to the experience of Alice Wonderland. It felt unreal, hard to believe that she was actually there, experiencing it, almost as if Dorothy was observing herself. Dorothy felt that a door was opened and she was able to see an experience for the first time. Without this experience, she feels that she would not be the person that she is today. When Dorothy saw what she described as an ocean of wheat fields she felt that it was at once both desolate and exquisite - that she had never seen such desolation before. She felt both awestruck and calmed by the experience.

"one of the words that comes to mind is awestruck, and the other is calm. Calming, yes. So on one hand I was like, you know my mouth was wide open and it was like, oh my goodness and the other feeling was this sort of calming feeling. (T6. 56-66)

On a separate occasion Dorothy went backpacking in a remote part of California. This was the first experience she had had of remote wilderness. She described how after a couple of days of moving into the wilderness there was nothing but her, her partner and nature. This experience shared some similarities with the experience she had of camping because there was some fear, particularly of bears. Dorothy felt it took her a couple of days to settle until all of the rhythms of the city had subsided. The period of settling felt like a process of exhaling and releasing.

Dorothy felt that being in nature was integral to her realisation that love is not something 'out there' but being something inside of her.

"I, I walked up this mountain.....I looked on the ground and there was this heart rock..... I picked it up and something..... it was one of those..... it was quite a profound moment of centring myself in my heart... that love wasn't something that was out there, that it was something in here. And that happened in nature. (T6. 239-250)

Dorothy felt that her heart was opening up where it had previously felt crushed and hurt. Nature was part of healing her pain and allowing her to feel love again.

Dorothy experienced a part of herself that she had not known before: she described this as the 'wild woman', not in terms of being crazy, but in terms of not being civilised and of being outside of social norms.

"I had that experience for the first time. And it was like 'awwww'. I discovered the 'male' part of myself... that likes to light fires and... doesn't care about how she looks um..... It was very liberating, very liberating.... In a ... actually even though even though it was very, I felt more male, it was soft. It wasn't macho male. (T6.147-161)

Now when Dorothy talks about herself she feels happy and comfortable thinking about herself at the mountain girl, this wild woman. She feels happier with the rugged, wild lifestyle and experience that she first encountered on her journey in the U.S.A. Her face lit up when she talked of this, she appeared vibrant, alive and energised.

Dorothy feels that water is like her uncharted territory, that there is more for her to discover about herself in relationship to water than any other part of being in nature. Dorothy feels a particular kind of opening feeling when she is at expansive water (the sea or large lakes) that is different from other large vistas. Water is a little scarier for her than other parts of nature; there is more of a sense of the unknown.

"You know when you look up at the sky at night, when you're out in nature, and see all the stars... you feel sort of insignificant, there's this huge.... That's how, a little bit... about the oceans..." (T6.613-627)

Dorothy feels that the water is somewhat like her unconscious or psyche. Considering the unseen depths is frightening and takes her outside of her everyday understanding.

Dorothy lives in an urban environment now in a different country, and when she goes to the park she feels that her body relaxes in a similar way to having a long bath - she described the experience as her nature bath. If Dorothy is feeling "a bit cranky" she goes out into the garden and feels much better, and the same with the park. These experiences are beneficial and help her feel better, both physically and emotionally.

DAVID'S EXPERIENCE

David has always enjoyed being out in nature - it has been integral to his life for as long as he can remember. Being in nature remains an important constant and priority. David feels part of nature, that it is integral to who he is. He describes nature as his "genetic heritage, biological heritage" (T3. 436-440). He feels connected with the history of the natural environment - this relationship with time and nature remains important. There is a sense of wonder and awe when David talks of part of nature that moves him.

"Now let me just think of that tree as something that's got some roots, something that has real character. You know, it's a, it's a wonderful, wonderful tree, it's been here for 400 years, 500 years or whatever it is. It's got some experiences, it's got some memories, I'm not going to suggest that I can get at those, but it's got a presence here." (T3. 157-166).

David described transformative experiences in nature that he experienced while taking part in long-distance endurance running, as well as more generally his experience of walking and being in countryside where he lives. He relishes the expansive aspect of nature - looking up at

the sky, a sense of unfolding and opening. There is a sense of more possibility and potential of looking outwards, liberation and widening of usual boundaries.

David feels at home in nature, that it is where he is meant to be and he feels this sense of place the moment he steps outside into the countryside. He finds himself in his own kind of rhythm in the music of nature and the sensory aspect of nature is central to his feeling of connection and the generative nature of the experience.

"I love the sound of the wind on my face, I love the sound of water, I really, and I really like the sound of the physicality of moving through nature. So, my heartbeat and the footfall... so these three sounds are probably my three favourite sounds." (T3. 302-304)

David becomes absorbed in the sensory experience, from the feel of the air on his face to the crunch of snow underfoot, grounding him firmly in the present. There is a very joyful, mindful quality to his description, a sense of vibrant meditation as he listened to being alive in the present, privileging the specialness of each moment, being deeply aware of, and feeling the movement of present time.

"I often pause and just stop to listen to whatever the sounds happen to be, sometimes just to catch the dogs back again before they go and harass the swans, but there's always a moment of just contemplation, and sometimes longer...." (T3. 581-587)

Particular parts of nature that David finds beautiful seem to draw him towards them, his favourite oak tree, the lake near where he lives, distorting time and space, so that he feels physically closer to the parts of nature that he values.

David feels emotionally more free in nature - tears flow fluidly, almost unconsciously as his feelings are expressed as they arise. His perspective on what is negative changes, minor irritations become more manageable. Being in nature increases his awareness that many of the rules of living are social conventions. When David is out on long runs he is more

comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. Being open to uncertainty and ambiguity is part of the transformation of the shift in perspective of what matters. It is also related to being more present. His happiness, contentment and calmness seem to spring from being where he feels he is meant to be. He smiles, he cries he expresses his felt experience as it arises through being in relationship.

David focuses on a particular tree that he feels a strong connection with it is deeply energising. The process of focussing on it, having it in his awareness, seems to turn it from being an object:

"instead of now being an object or something that needs to be negotiated, it becomes a source of inspiration and a source of excitement, a source of energy". (T3. 175-183)

The sense of hope and potential is palpable as David talks about this energy and excitement. In nature, David finds that his personal relationships are more creative, dynamic and interesting. The quality and content of dialogue, the felt experience of relationships, are all deeply embedded in their physical context. As the physical boundaries become organic and natural, so the relationship seem to open out and expand.

David has a relationship with different, intricate facets of nature

"there's the anticipation, and there's the intentionality I give to that, that hey, that's that tree and you know what I think it's beautiful if I look at it, and it's a friend, if I'm allowed to say that, if I'm not sounding.... too soppy, something that I care about", and "if you value something you're not going to trash it, you're not going to abuse it, suddenly it starts to become a different kind, a different kind of intentionality...." (T3. 560-571)

In a very real sense, the different parts of nature that David values seems to come alive. This is very important to him, and something he cares about deeply. There is a sense of self-consciousness articulating this. In what he described as "a more spiritual, whacky moment" he imagines that perhaps the tree might communicate with him:

"it's even... sending some positive vibes my way... and maybe it does, and who's to say it doesn't"?.... (T3. 188-196).

By anticipating the beauty and thrill that he expects to experience he feels that nature becomes more thrilling and more beautiful. To stand and acknowledge and appreciate it is important; to anticipate it is to experience it as being more special. David wonders if nature has some level of consciousness and intentionality; certainly for him there is a real sense of nature being alive and him experiencing himself more vibrantly in nature.

ALANA'S EXPERIENCE

Alana's relationship to nature is central to her wellbeing: she has known this at a very embodied level for a long time. Alana took part in a 12-hour immersion in nature which she experienced as transformative: silent and alone for the duration. This immersion took place in a remote, exposed landscape on the Scottish mainland with amazing, expansive views out to sea and across to spectacular mountains. Throughout this time, although she was in physical pain as a result of long-term chronic health issues, Alana felt mentally and emotionally strong.

Alana's relationship with nature stretches back as far as she can remember, and she recalls it in detail:

“When I was primary school age you’d cross over the road and you’d be on the marshes, you’d see curlews on the bus on the way to school. Primary school looked out over the water to Scotland, we’d do field trips down on the shore” (T2.51-55).

When Alana has recalled the transformative experience of her immersion on occasions since she has connected with it in a way that feels like the experience is still very present. Throughout her immersion experience Alana was in pain: she noticed that when she was in less pain she was aware of looking outwards and enjoying what was going on around her.

Even in her pain, it felt important to her to stay and experience, as if she was drawn to where she sat.

Alana chose her particular spot for the immersions experience and felt that she had chosen a place that was completely right for her - she did not want for or long for what was not present. Sitting on the shore enabled her to look forward across the sea to the island mountains; turning behind she could see the lodge from where she had come. The landscape seems like a pivot on which she was poised between stillness and movement - stillness from being still on land looking towards the enduring presence of the mountains and movement from the sea and the weather and the passing of time. Knowing that she could look back and choosing to look outwards.

Listening to the rain fall on the tarpaulin was a very beautiful experience, particularly in contrast to the more usual and everyday view of rain being a hindrance. Looking out to sea and seeing many rainbows was important – there seemed something symbolic in the rainbow's representation of the contrast between sun and rain, and Alana loved and valued this contrast. Being able to stick with and find the positive in the low points as well as the high points of both her felt physical embodied experience as well as the experience of the fluctuating elements was important for Alana. The transition moments between what Alana observed as the lows and the highs brought much beauty for her. When the sun came out after the rain ceased she felt a real sense of joy and lightness in its warmth. Alana felt like a bird stretching out and expanding after being huddled up and cocooned. Both the expansive experience of looking out to the sea and the mountains as well as the tiniest detail of blades of grass moving and raindrops hitting the water were points of focus. Thinking about being in the mountains made Alana feel happy and she felt that her body wanted to relax just talking about it – she continues to experience a sense of peace and contentment on an ongoing basis when she thinks about or tunes into this experience. Being in nature is calming, relaxing, and

she feels contented. This lightness feels freeing – Alana's face lights up and she smiles as she talks.

Being in nature grounds and helps centre Alana, helps her rebalance her experience. Facets of life that matter seem clearer while peripheral concerns seem to fade away. The complications of everyday life are stripped back in nature to reveal a clear simplicity. Because of this simplicity, it is difficult to specify what this transformative experience is like emotionally:

“because it’s almost like there isn’t anything to comment on because it just is”. (T2.478-481)

Alana experiences a sense of loss and sadness by the sea that touches her core. Alana feels that since she was a child she has had:

“a real in the stomach sense of, of, of sadness and loss...I feel it... yeah I really feel it..... yeah, it’s definitely predominantly the sea... I think I’ve occasionally had it perhaps when I’ve been up in the mountains..... I guess when I... it’s probably a similar to when I’m feeling incredibly compassionate towards somebody there’s almost an element of yearning in it” (T2.500-519).

This sadness is a sense of wanting something but not really knowing what that something is. Existence feels simpler and slower in nature as Alana connects with what really matters in her life – a sense of what matters being revealed or announcing itself as unimportant things fade away evokes a present peace.

When Alana is near water, the sea in particular, she has a sense that she does not exist anymore. The feeling of sadness and loss that is familiar to her when she is near the sea is seen by her as relating to a feeling of her ‘self’ disappearing: that she is letting go of her ego in the experience of being ‘part of’ the landscape and nature. In nature, Alana feels that she knows who she is, that she returns to some truth about herself that is outside of a sense of

‘ego’ – a constructed sense of who she is that dissolves, particularly by the sea. Letting go of this is sad yet seems inevitable and is also a highly-valued process.

Alana has a bodily knowing that she is part of the whole that is nature. This bodily knowing does not need intellectual understanding. At the beginning of her transformative experience, Alana was reflecting on the question ‘who am I?’ She had a powerful experience that she was

“just this person sitting on this rock here, looking at those mountains over there that’s it, you don’t need to know anything else.” (T2.138-143).

Being in nature felt like returning home, coming back to a base point of self that is a strong and deep awareness – it is this experience that she continues to try and hold onto in day to day life.

Alana feels that the interconnection that she experiences is spiritual – that she is linked to something much bigger. Alana is determined to hold and maintain the experiential awareness gained from her transformative experience in nature, particularly in terms of focussing on being more present with what is actually around her at each particular moment. Alana felt that she could not completely or adequately capture her transformative experiences or her relationship with nature in its entirety, and felt frustrated trying to share it with other people. Alana hopes that other people will experience it for themselves.

EDUR'S EXPERIENCE

Edur lives in a region famous for its peaks and its extensive dramatic mountain ranges. One of his favourite places is a ski area very close to where he lives which has some of the finest skiing in the world. Edur skis regularly with a group of friends - being outdoors is an integral part of Edur's life. Edur skis in an environment that offers the ability to be in wilderness. He had never been to the area where he had this particular transformative experience before - it

was far from the beaten track and required substantial effort to get to. He had heard it described as pretty awesome with champagne powder snow. Usually Edur finds it hard to calm his mind and experience being in the moment. Often when he skis he finds everything slows down and he is much more perceptive and aware of the present. Preceding this particular experience, Edur had had an emotionally turbulent time. He had experienced family bereavements, had recently finished a traumatic graduate school programme and he felt that he was just emerging from this trauma and chaos. On this occasion Edur and his friends decided to go to a particular ski area that had remained unchartered for them and which was remote from the main area. Edur described getting to the top of this bowl:

"it was this very surreal scene. it was like this hazy sunshine where the sun was shrouded by these little line clouds, almost like this fog sitting over like, you know, the bowl itself. you've got these trees you know, shrouded also in snow and, you know, you've got also what sunlight you've got peaking through. The snow's kind of glistening and it's almost sort of like this magical scene, kind of... un.. unreal. (T5. 45-52)

There was nobody else around, and the four friends looked at each other as Edur described:

"like 'Oh My God', like, you know, could this be heaven? Could this be heaven? And no words were exchanged, just kind of like, we've got to do this..... I can't tell you how magical the moment was."

Time seemed to stand suspended in this moment. It was like floating on a cloud and felt particularly transformative after the personal chaos of the previous couple of years. The scene felt ethereal - magically pivoted on the edge of reality. Edur realized that this was the first time for a long time where he could hear himself think in the moment and feel present in his surroundings. The noise and chaos of previous years seemed to dissipate. Nature seemed to help him let go, as if being present was the only option in such awe-inspiring beauty. Just being present was very powerful, and in such contrast to his previous experience over the preceding years. This was very different from his usual experience of skiing. He seemed to

float down the mountain, whereas usually he felt every part of the ground directly underneath him. This floating felt effortless, as if gravity, momentum and snow were carrying him along. This moment felt surreal,

" It was just, you just had to let the, just had to let the moment kind of carry you down the mountain. (T5. 95-98)

Again, this continued the ethereal moment - effortless and fluid - and had such a spiritual feeling to it. In this moment he felt that there was nothing else distracting him, that he was giving the present moment his full focus. This moment was shared with the people that he was with:

"it was just like this sort of 'Oh My God' moment. Like, Wow. It is everything that we thought it would be and more (T5. 112-123)

The experience seemed like it was the feeling of being connected to this greater whole and this connection had a sense of being a very spiritual experience.

There was a powerful absorbing of silence and awareness of sensory experience:

"You know that cold air, you know touching your face, you know breathing it in and then seeing your breathe when it comes out your nose. You know.... Yep, feeling the soft snow under your..... under your skis. And just drinking it all in..... (T5. 163-168)

Emotionally this moment was exhilarating, and Edur felt that it had a spiritual quality.

Although his experience in the snowy mountains is the primary transformative experiences, Edur described having an experience that shared some essential qualities when he was in the Greek Islands.

"I was just swimming in the blue waters of the Mediterranean and just realizing to myself 'Wow'! you know..... (laughing) this is unreal! Like I have... it was almost like one of those pinch me I'm dreaming kind of things." (T5. 326-333)

From experiences such as these and living in an environment that puts a high priority on being outdoors, Edur has begun to realize that he is going to need that time outside in nature as ongoing part of his future life.

"I feel like it's an opportunity wasted if I didn't incorporate that in my life. I'm going to keep that in my life. I mean these are precious moments. I mean um, you know, as you can see, almost at, can't exactly be.... You know... verbally explicitly explained... moments that, you know, give balance and they give a sense of cadence to you know, my daily rhythms. They've probably brought some measure of peace and some measure of you know self-awareness, in a, in a healthy way to me." (T5. 495-56)

Edur feels that usually he is quite control-orientated in his life. Being very present, he found something of what it means to be himself. He does not feel those moments when he is self-conscious or observing himself, how he looks or sounds, for example. He was aware of who he was, that he knew himself, and that he did not have to do anything with himself. Being in nature has shown something to Edur about balance in life and also feels that those experiences in nature have shown him that there is a

"rhythm also to... who you are as a person. Yes you can do everything you want in life, but there's certain times when you don't need to do everything. (T5. 510-523)

Being still is important:

"You've just got to sit and take in the moment. You know, everything else will be, you know, it'll be waiting for you and you'll still need to take care of it, but sometimes you just need to stop and shut up and turn off, you know, everything that's going on in your head. (T5. 526-529)

Part of the transformative experience related to experiencing a shift in time. Through the feeling of being very present, after several years of painful times and chaos, Edur realized that nothing lasts forever, both the painful times and the very precious moments. This

provided relief from the prospect and experience of difficulties and a feeling of needing to enjoy and savour the magic of the present moment. There are two sides to the impermanence of life that Edur is shown in nature. Nothing lasts forever: this is both a relief and an urgency to live.

Edur's transformative experience has impacted on how he views life, the choices that he makes and the direction that he takes, particularly in terms of feeling an active participant in his life. Edur suggested that being reintroduced or reminded of the world beyond his own contextual experience relates to the sense of urgency that he feels and his increased awareness of the choices that he makes in terms of how to live. Key words that come up in relation to the transformative experience are:

" consciousness..... making active decisions..... opportunity..... um, no regrets.....! (T5. 643-647)

GEMMA'S EXPERIENCE

Gemma grew up in countryside near the sea, and only truly began to realize how important being in nature was when she moved to the city. Gemma described how important being on the beach was for as she grew up:

"I just remember around that time for me getting away, being on my own, was so important to me. And just to be able to think, I just... what did I do down there? I must have just sat, you know, I don't know how long, just sat and thought and dreamed, (T4. 679-682).

She has returned to live near the sea, and experiences similar feelings as an adult. Gemma had a particular transformative experience in early adulthood which remains important to her many years later. She was starting to explore her identity and meaning and had been considering different religions and philosophies:

"I sort of hit upon paganism I started understanding about crystals and I was told you know that you must wash your crystals and the best time to do it is at midnight, or no, not at midnight at a full moon. (T4. 40-46)

Gemma bought 3 quartz crystals and went to cleanse them to become in tune with them. She went to the sea in the moonlight to bath them. Holding them in her hands she let the waves lap over them before placing them in a shallow bowl on a rock. The water gently lapped over them and suddenly a large wave came along. As it receded it took them away. Lit by the moonlight, Gemma searched in vain and after spending a long time looking she decided that there was nothing that she could do.

Gemma felt she had to understand what this deeply upsetting experience meant to come to terms and accept it, and she felt there was a learning about things getting taken away from her. The following morning she returned to the beach to look for the crystals, as she did over the course of at least 3 tides. Several days later, she returned to the same spot and all three crystals were near where she had lost them. Gemma described finding them:

"Yeah, I was, I just.... It was like I was meant to find them. I was meant to let them go and, and having let them go, I could then find them again. (T4. 152-157)."

Since this time, Gemma has experienced that when she lets things go they either come back to her or come back in a slightly different way. This experience was some twenty years ago, yet remains vibrant and alive for Gemma. The sense that she has made of it also continues to have a significant impact.

Gemma's relationship with nature is fundamental: nature brings her back to who she is, in touch with herself, "but without all the stresshead on". (T4. 921-924). She relaxes and feels at home in nature and it sustains her: it is where she feels that she can breathe. Although throughout her life this has often involved time spent on the beach, or on large expansive

vistas, gardening has become a very transformative experience for Gemma. Gemma struggles to find words that convey the feeling of being in nature, words just don't seem to hit the spot.

"once I'm in it it's just endless, timeless, limitless" (T4. 334.)

A feeling of freedom permeates Gemma's description, contrasting with being in the city where she feels enclosed. Peace accompanies this freedom, particularly related to getting away from social rules. Inherent in this freedom is the liberation of not being constricted in either space or time, particularly in terms of rules and routines.

Gemma feels that the more space she is in the less anxious she is. Gemma used her hands to describe the expansive experience of being in nature (researcher's voice is in italics).

"....when I imagine myself being out in nature my hands, I just feel I want to stretch my hands out wide...*For the tape, they are stretched out wide and it's kind of, it feels very expansive....*
Feeling. Yes again it comes back to this idea of freedom being able to breathe, those kind of things. It's like all of the stress, the worry, ideas that you have about, of what you want in your life just, 'whoosh'! (T4. 210-218)

Gemma feels that her relationship with nature helps her maintain her sanity, it seems to nurture her and feeling it's expanse is reassuring, affirming and empowering. When Gemma reflects on her experience of transformation in nature it is a very holistic experience, one that impacts on and involves her whole being and all of her senses.

"So it's the sound of the waves crashing in, it's the visual stimulus of the green, the green sort of grass and the rocks and the colour of things, the boats. The feel of the wind on my face, that was an amazing thing as well I used to love being, just feeling the wind..... (T4. 693-704)

Gemma feels that she loses a sense of self.

"The me, the individual person, my brain, my sense of, well my sense of self is not completely lost, because I'm aware of myself, but I'm not...There's no boundaries to me.....

I'm merged in with the earth, with the environment, with the trees, you know, with the buses, the cars, the clouds, everything in the world is all interconnected." (T4. 397-401)

This feeling resonates with her spiritual philosophy of interconnection.

"We are the tree at one time, at the same time that we are the mountains, the rock, the grass. We are part of everything." (T4. 450-454)

Nature nourishes Gemma's soul, restoring her equilibrium. Being completely at one with nature, at one with everything in the world feels very valuable: there is a sense of spirituality that is difficult to articulate.

"Because it's wordless, it's timeless, it's a feeling of utter serenity. Just peace. You know. I don't know.... Would that be the Buddhist Nirvana?"(T4. 367-373)

ASHLEY'S TRANSFORMATION

Transformation in nature was not a defined, specific moment for Ashley, though there are several peak experiences and landmark occasions. Ashley experienced a gradual process of transformation in nature that took approximately 15 years, with a couple of pivotal events during this process. He described this as a dialogue between self, environment, reading and ideas. Ashley has practiced yoga and meditation and feels that this is part of the relationship that he has with nature:

"the ability to tune into your own experience, to have some way of speaking about your experience, which is rooted in the body. (T7.675-681)

Being in nature was and is a pivotal and critical part of his experience of transformation. This long-term process began in Ashley's youth, a time when he felt sustained, severe pressure from the outside world during his studies as a musician. The environments that Ashley noted as being transformative shared the quality of wilderness, though they ranged from being at

the ocean, in the desert and in the forest. Ashley's transformative experience is fluid and sustained, a sense of opening out, experiencing, reflecting on experience and returning back to nature to find more out about the connection. There is a sense of Ashley and nature being in tune together to reach a deeper sustained awareness.

When Ashley was around 20 years old he went to a retreat for an extended period of time. Prior to this experience, Ashley had been in a competitive line of study: the change to living a very simple life in a natural environment was in stark contrast to his previous life experience and was something that he relished. What Ashley described as mundane living left him happier than he had ever been. In a simpler environment Ashley felt less pressure to be something. There is a sense that the simple life that Ashley was living during this time lay the path towards opening up for the transformative experience Ashley had. During his time at the monastery, Ashley was sent to collect some plants up the river. The monastery was in a very wild and remote location and Ashley got lost (researcher's voice is in italics).

"It was... forest.I walked up a river.*through forest*... very wild forest. Had never been... forested. And it's... the monastery is set in a wilderness, protected wilderness area, and it's 14 miles into the wilderness area to get to the monastery. So it's..... (T7. -42)

Ashley was out for approximately five hours and on his return to the meditation hall he realized that he just felt different (T7.18-21).

"I remember I looked around and I thought, this is all just completely arbitrary. Everything that, everything that was going on just seemed arbitrary. (T7.18-21)

This experience left Ashley feeling disorientated - at the time he did not feel that he had the support to actually talk about or understand it: making sense of the experience took place gradually over a long-period of time. Ashley has known for a long-time that being in nature was transformative for him. Until he developed an understanding that he could articulate and integrate into something meaningful, this experiential knowledge was unsettling.

Ashley feels that his transformative experience moved from a more abstract appreciation to being the thrust and momentum for his life over time. His relationship in nature means everything to him, it is indistinguishable from who he is. Ashley feels that the transformative experience is still unfolding, that the dialogue continues and develops. (T7. 536-544).

Ashley had particular peak moments, such as the one in the monastery that he did not understand. He had been told, or believed that nature did not impact on the psyche at all, so repeated experiences of being in nature and experiencing himself feeling different clashed with those beliefs. These experiences were de-stabilising, as they challenged his sense of knowing who he was, and he felt that he needed support to navigate the transformation.

Ashley felt that he had to go into nature

"for years on end and keep on having the same experience until you realise like there's actually an experience..."(T7.382-388).

Learning to articulate his experience involved accepting and understanding his relationship with nature, reading other people's words in order to come towards some understanding and acceptance.

"So there has been this huge transformation, my life is completely different. And, I've become, what is it, John Lennon says 'you can become you in time' – 'it's easy', you know, (T7.392-396)

Ashley described this transformation as taking a lot of time, and at the same time being the story of his life so far. The transformative experience in nature is a part of Ashley's process of being alive.

The period of time that Ashley was in this environment stretched from the winter into the spring. Part of the significance of his experience was an appreciation that he was part of this changing rhythm, rather than being an observer of nature and the seasons. (T7.65-66).

"And... I remember experiencing the seasons.... You know one day it was suddenly sunny and there were flowers andand... I just, I registered that I had never experienced... um... the sort of changing of the... of nature's rhythms in a very direct way." (T7.54-60)

There is a real sense of awakening - as if shocked at the level and enduring nature of previous disconnection. In nature, Ashley feels that he faces life experientially rather than analytically. Ashley experienced a sense of spontaneous knowing in nature rather than knowledge being arrived at through calculation or reasoning. He described this as a sense wisdom. He feels that he is more centred and that the validity of his experience is most uncompromised in nature compared to in other environments. In nature he feels more able to hold contradictions and be with uncertainty, he feels freer in nature and that nature places less constraints on him. When Ashley spends time in nature, it is not that things become clearer, but that not understanding becomes more acceptable.

Being in nature helps Ashley experience what he describes as a more real or authentic self. Ashley began to feel that he could experience himself as he found himself since natural environments do not value or place importance on success and looks. Ashley feels that in general nature facilitates a more real sense of self. Nature, and Ashley's dialogue and reflection around his experience helped him be aware and develop himself.

"if feels very authentic. No one taught me this, you know, I figured it out through this whole relational process I'm talking about." (T7.561-562)

Ashley has a profound sense of trusting himself in nature - and experiencing himself completely. Ashley feels that being in nature allows him to access some kind of spirituality:

"knowledge of the self. And knowledge of the capital self.....The, you know the, real thing. The really real reality. That's one of the powers.. of being in nature." (T7.479-486)

SILVESTER'S EXPERIENCE

"Several years ago I began to experience a significant shift in how I perceived this reality called Life. Traversing through a long period in my life that some call the dark night of the soul, the forest began to beckon me to commune with Her. Suffering from extreme bouts of depression and hopelessness, I went into the forest over and over again where I was able to glimpse a sigh of relief, which no other activity could provide. It was in those moments of communing with nature that I began to realize that She would be my healer, my lover, my strength, and my joy, and that She was indeed the very substance and sustenance of my life. As I reflected on the larger scale of suffering experienced by people throughout our society, I began to sense that the root issue was that humans had become disconnected, dissociated with nature and the natural rhythms of Life."

Silvester had a period of existential crisis that he described as the dark night of the soul that lasted many years. He had been employed in the corporate world and had felt uneasy with this, so had left to live in a yoga ashram. This did not bring him the comfort and peace that he was looking for, and he went further into an enduring existential crisis, searching for meaning and purpose in his life. He had many health problems, was feeling depressed and disconnected, and extremely tired. This period of time felt relentless. He moved back to the land of his birth and suffered major multiple bereavements of family members. This was a traumatic time. Trying to hold the remaining family together and to bear what was going on, Silvester also lost everything financially during this time.

"there was a hopelessness..... there was this sense of isolation and aloneness and a sense of, of utter despair.And that would, that never would leave me. I would just keep myself up at night until I was so totally exhausted that I would just pass out. I did this for years. And panic attacks. (T8.171-181)

During and after this traumatic time, while Silvester was trying to come to terms with his experience and feeling full of despair, he began to seek solace in the woods, which he felt

were calling him. It is this experience that felt transformative and of which Silvester talks. Silvester lives in a small town with an extensive wooded area which he described as unbelievably beautiful. Although he had moved away during the time of great loss, he felt lead by nature to the woods where he now lives.

"ten feet probably twelve feet outside my front door, well the only door that I have is the most beautiful white pine in the entire city. I'm out on the edge of this city so this whole property's filled with these old magnificent trees. And it goes down to the river and it goes down to.. so actually really in the woods." (T8.91-95)

At the hardest of times, experiencing the most profound loss, desperation and emotional collapse, Silvester found momentary peace in nature. Drawn to his precious, beautiful earth for healing and an intangible sense of holistic wellbeing, even in the midst of pain and trauma.

Silvester's despair, loss and anxiety seemed unrelenting. During this time, with these feelings, he went into the woods and experienced little glimpses of hope in the beauty of nature. Silvester felt called by the woods to go into them. He felt that these were very sacred to him. Initially Silvester did not have much energy, going in for maybe ten minutes at a time. He began to do this on a daily basis. This gradually increased and Silvester now spends a lot of time out in nature to the point that he lives amongst the trees. These glimpses of hope were momentary feelings of connection, feeling grounded and a sense of oneness. Even during times of intense anxiety, depression and loneliness Silvester experienced the power of nature, taking messages that have stayed with him.

"You know there was this other part of me that, you know and the deer would come up and get close you know, and the butterflies would ... on me and so..... you know there's a polarity,

and it was like, like I was experiencing both ends of the polarity at the same time." (T8.190-199)

Silvester had amazing 'WOW' kind of moments during his time of despair - he felt intimate with both ends of experience. Silvester was experiencing deep pain on a personal level and at the same time joy and bliss through seeing the wonder of nature and through experiencing connection. Silvester felt that nature showed him his entire experience.

Having had his life turned upside down, Silvester found solace in the most fundamental way of being and in the smallest 'Wow' moments of nature. He felt himself opened to an energy and healing, a little at a time. This connectedness and peacefulness contrasted with the overwhelming anxiety that he also felt, showing him a little hope in the darkest of nights.

"I was just having these experiences where I saw nature just unfolding before me and I was a part of it, but I also was experiencing the magnificence of it." (T8.47-49)

Silvester felt that going with the flow of the energy, particularly moving in nature, helped anxiety dissipate over time. Being in the woods seemed to be the only sense of peace and solace that he could find.

"For instance, one day I was sitting there and it was a beautiful day and I don't remember what season it was and I just noticed the trees were gently blowing in the breeze and the river was running there and the birds were flying. (T8.37-39)"

This, and other similar experiences, helped Silvester begin to find some contentment. Silvester felt that nature has taught him to be at peace with what is. From these experiences Silvester felt a sense of connectedness and peacefulness. He is now in his 50s and feels that he has searched all his life for what he has found in nature.

Silvester feels that his whole life has been impacted by his experiences and he tries to bring awareness of his relationship with nature into all aspects of how he lives. He feels that this is a process that he is constantly part of, and that nature continues to refine him.

Prior to spending extended periods of time in nature, Silvester never felt that he was grounded. Now he feels a strong sense of being grounded and embodied and that he has come to know himself and his experience at a deeper level. This gives him a sense of solace, a sense of trust in nature, a feeling of being taken care of, of being settled, rooted in nature. This is experienced as being a move from head to heart, as if head and heart have come together. There is a deep contentment through feeling embodied in nature, and that he has found who he really is through feeling more embodied.

Silvester referred to the Bhagavad Gita, a very rich spiritual text, and the struggle that Arjuna had to bring his heart and his mind together. It is this sense of oneness, this merging together, that Silvester describes experiencing in nature.

Silvester experienced a physical renewal being in nature, particularly when he moved to live amongst the woods. Recently Silvester was sitting outside and felt that he was being sustained by nature. Part of this feeling is a sense of physical connection, of his body being made of and in nature. This is also reflected in nature providing alternative cures to his ailments, which he feels nature helped him navigate.

Silvester experienced a sense of communing with nature and of being at one (researchers voice is in italics).

"I looked at a flower ... and I would just lay there on the path and just sit there and stare at this and commune with this flower and people would walk by me thought I was crazy..... I would stand there, like one day I was standing there in front of a tree and I could feel this tree breathing me in and me breathing the tree in. And you know and this..... *So a kind of sense of*

oneness..... A sense of oneness I began to have a lot of experiences like that with er, with nature. "(T8.57-65)

Slowly nature helped Silvester move a little towards accepting his experiences, focussing on the present provided a momentary relief from the trauma that had happened and opened his heart to wonder and awe.

Silvester views nature as a sacred mother that has given him life. He feels that he has a similar relationship with nature as he did with his birth mother. Something about his experience of being in nature feels like being cradled or held. Silvester experiences being in touch with what he calls the 'divine feminine' in nature, which is where he feels that he moves and communicates more from his heart rather than from cognitive or intellectual understanding.

Silvester feels that there is an infinite source in nature that is indescribable. Within that single creation, however, there is infinite variety that Silvester finds deeply awe inspiring. Nothing is repeated, everything is born, lives and dies uniquely. Silvester experiences a divine leading and divinely inspired guide that comes from nature and he experiences being called by this spirit of nature. He feels that the divine is in everything - this is something that he used to believe on an intellectual level and that he has experienced very personally.

Silvester feels that when he is in nature he is talking to the earth:

'teach me how to hear your voice'. You know, and to hear what you're saying to me. (T8.587-591)

Silvester feels that there is a part of him that:

"is very much up in the clouds, the skies, that's connected with this otherly, other world, other than the physical. I probably have way more there than most people would recognise."
(T8.509-512)

He has beautiful experiences with nature and also with the silence that is behind nature.

LINETTE'S EXPERIENCE

Linette feels that nature gives her hints about how to live life in a way that she does not get outside of nature. Nature helps Linette see the bigger picture; it is calming and helps her feel a connected part of something bigger. The transformative experiences that Linette has in nature are moments that she cannot force: if she looks for a particular experience in nature sometimes she is frustrated that she cannot find it. She waits for nature to radiate to her, maintaining an openness and an awareness to the connection.

An over-riding theme is the metaphors Linette takes from nature into her everyday life. Natural evolution and transformation reassure Linette that as the seasons change, so difficult times in life are not permanent.

When Linette does not have connection to nature she notices changes: if she has been too long in the city she feels a sense of gloominess and a stuckness of being in her head for too long. This sensation is a feeling of being trapped in a closed circular system with thoughts going round and round in a rather disconnected and repetitive motion.

The hints that nature shows Linette are much more than a faith, they are the picture of the world, a truth rather than a metaphor or analogy, since she is part of the nature that she observes. Linette turns to nature for guidance, looking to what she feels part of. To some extent this feels like she is turning to a truth in herself. This is not a searching for an

experience, it is as if the natural world shows her something of herself, holding a reflective mirror.

Linette lives in the city and has found a pond with ducks on it that she describes as her little gap to nature. At present she retreats to the pond on a weekly basis and these retreats help her not get too caught up in things. Linette dives into the pond and swims 100 metres to the far bank. On the other side there is a heron nesting and she floats there for a little while, looking at the heron and watching him make his nest. As she watches she feels calm. She sees him taking little straws and pieces of twigs and building his home. She feels that she always has a pile of things to do waiting for her, and that

"if I just go there once a week and you know, just touch base in a way, just sort of a reminder there's a bigger life out there as well. It's not me in my flat, looking at trivia paperwork."
(T9.321-326)

As she looks at the heron, and as she swims through the green water she sees life happening in way that is different from her day to day work and living. Seeing this other side reminds her also that there's another side to herself. Often Linette feels like a failure, and this experience shows her another side to her, a side that likes swimming, that appreciates these moments, that is playful and calm.

Linette relishes the very physical experience of jumping into freezing water which contrasts with her more intellectual day to day focus. She feels more completely alive, grounded in the coldness of the experience which almost necessitates that she stays present. When Linette gets out of the water she does not want to take a shower, instead wanting to hold the experience a little bit longer on her skin. Physically she is very tired and part of this increased awareness of being in her leads to a more holistic focus.

Linette spoke of her retreats into nature as private 'no strings attached' moments where she is at her own pace and by her rules. This feels important particularly because Linette feels she often plays by other people's rules. There is a sense that her swimming outside shakes up her self-perception and her usual view of her strengths and weaknesses. She feels more able to be with and accept her own rhythm and pace, indeed to enjoy and luxuriate in it. Linette finds the experience liberating and fun, she describes how this impacts on her:

"I think that creeps into my life then. I actually find myself more playful the more I do..."
(T9.350-356)

Before Linette jumps into the pond she feels self conscious and somewhat critical of herself for playing around, that this is not a constructive past time. Linette feels her head go round in what feels like a closed unit: it feels hot and that the machine of her head is very compact.

"I suppose that's why I need to freeze a little bit.....Going from this hot, stuffy compartment, where this engine is working, to throwing cold water over it. (T9.374-381)

When Linette jumps in she feels an immediate release. She is also aware that she feels more productive when her engine feels a little cooler. The physical side of the experience takes over as soon as she is in the water. When Linette is swimming she has a present-focussed curiosity and sense of wonder about her immediate environment. A sense of playfulness takes over as she wonders how many somersaults she can do without returning to the surface to catch her breath.

After the experience Linette's perspective and focus shifts, and things that she describes as little become very important.

"I get home and have a sweet cup of tea and... yeah, it's like little things. And I suppose then I, in a way I can see it as a, not regress, but I call on things I used to as a child, like sweet tea, then not sitting in front of my computer then, rather getting a blanket to go over my legs while

I sit in front of the computer, take time to do things a little bit more my way, or with quality."
(T9.433-437)

Linette's values begin to transform away from task completion towards a present focus. She feels that her engine room has been cooled down.

"the perspective is, there's just a need... this'll get done whether I make a cup of tea or not. I don't have to stay in that mode of going, going, going, fearing that I won't get through it. Because I just know that even if I don't, the heron is still going to build its nest, this is still going to do this, this is still going to do this, and it's OK." (T9.449-456)

There is an increased level of sensuality in her description, away from the heady closed-circuit chatter and constant pressure towards a more nurturing, slower and calmer energy.

Linette experiences a transformation through being aware of the seasons: nature provides reassurance through the combination of its continued presence and that the seasons are in a process of continuous change.

"You know you go through coldness but then you get warm again. And it's nice and it's and when it's winter but you know at least it's going to change again. And it's something about the cycle and the consistency and I sort of translate that to life as well. Going through a down, it's OK because the season will change again in life and you'll end up in a warmer season, or a spring season, so yeah, that's sort of... (T9.9-14)

This helps Linette approach life and her own experience more fluidly. A couple of years ago she went through a very low spell which her appreciation of nature helped put into a particular perspective:

" I don't want to call it depression, but I just know it wasn't... it was a bit of winter. ...I know if winter comes again, you know after winter there's spring or summer. So it sort of

eases that tension of trying to escape something or trying to get away from something... because I know... yeah.... it'll go. There's a natural thing to, that it'll go." (T9.125-131)

When Linette is in nature and has a significant moment she feels completely peaceful.

"It's not a euphoria, it's not a major inspirational feeling, it's just a calmness, a contentment. I think for me that's more important than euphoria, or inspiration, or....*So it feels very still and calm.* Yes, very still. (T9.276-287)

When Linette looks at the dark clouds outside of her window she sees them passing and this is reassuring in terms of how she perceives herself.

"But if I think about nature and how it has, at the moment there's dark clouds and there's blue sky, and there's light fluffy clouds... it's sort of how I can see myself. Yeah there's dark clouds, but if I really look there's blue sky as well. (T9.107-116)

Recently she went swimming in the Mediterranean. She recalled looking down at the teal water, a colour she has always loved and realising that there were so many shades, that nature offered a vastness that is almost incomprehensible and not able to be covered by the limitations of language. She described how this experience connected with her.

"it makes me aware that I can't just pigeonhole myself or pigeonhole other things, because there's a vastness to it that I don't get. It makes me apprehensive in life to stereotype things or to think about things too narrowly because when I am in nature, or when I realize something about it, and the variety... it takes me back a bit. (T9.30-37)

This widens her outlook on life, as she realises that there is so much more that she cannot begin to imagine and that she does not know about.

As well as feeling that she needs to be mindful of nature's vastness, Linette appreciates that the natural world is made out of small atoms, so she feels it is important to value the details

as well. She used the analogy of Monet's painting of water lilies to show the connectedness she feels in nature between the smallest atoms being part of the vast whole. Nature shows her that she has to value both zoning in and zoning out and that this is how she lives her life. Linette feels that she has to zone in to make her experience in the world, as part of the vast, complex system, worthwhile.

Linette feels a connectedness from each of the small things of her day to day life and the vastness of nature as the planet goes around. This sense of nature being infinitely big and at the same time incomprehensibly small feels spiritual to Linette, that it is supernatural.

"I'm trying to make something, well killing the time, while it goes round... on this thing, and I might as well do it with something I like or something I think contributes in some way to it, even if it is just to make me happy, and then spill over to my family and... that's also worthwhile." (T9.266-271)

Being part of this vast system provides some liberation for her: the world will go ahead no matter what she does, and she takes the idea 'it's not the end of the world' very literally.

"it doesn't really matter what I do here, or if I struggle to make a decision, it doesn't even matter which decision I'm going to make, it's hardly going to influence... the seasons or the world or the base thing, I base my life on in nature and the world." (T9.195-203)

A UNIVERSAL DESCRIPTION OF TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE IN NATURE

At the simplest level, being in nature is an important part of life. It is described as fundamental, healing, and central to wellbeing across all levels, physical, social, personal and spiritual. Transformation in nature happens sometimes at particular moments that are described as peak experiences and sometimes more gradually over many years, with peak moments and occasions noted as pivotal points. I begin by providing an overview of where transformative experiences happened, in broad terms in order to protect confidentiality, and an overview of the process of transformation. Once I have examined the impact of the experience I describe themes raised in the description of the phenomenon under the broad headings of the existential dimensions: physical, social, personal and spiritual. The aim of the findings is to offer a rich textural and structural description of the universal experience of the phenomenon.

THE LOCATION OF THE PHENOMENON

Transformative experiences happen in a wide range of natural environments. Wilderness is a central feature, though such experiences also happen in more populated, urban surroundings. However, being in urban environments sometimes leads to a feeling of being trapped, missing space, a feeling of being in the wrong place, of disconnection, and particularly of feeling less embodied with a greater focus on cognitions and intellectual processes than more experiential, holistic awareness. Increases in scale and vastness are associated with wilder environments in the descriptive accounts, and encourage an openness to and expansion of experience, a sense of possibility and potential and to looking outwards and beyond. Descriptions of nature by research participants as the location for transformative experiences includes Asian forests, the central plains of the U.S.A, different areas in the Mediterranean,

mountain ranges in UK, Europe and U.S.A., the middle of a capital city, suburban river-sides, remote islands and sea-scapes.

THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Nature is a fundamental part of the day to day lives of people that have had transformative experiences, whether or not these experiences were described as peak, gradual, or enduring. Whether it is a pinnacle point or a more gradual experience, the moment of transformation feels like having found something through the relationship with nature that had previously been searched for in religion, in philosophy, in literature and other such places. The moment of transformative experience seems to be an awakening, reinvigorating and a shift in focus. Just some examples of the descriptions of being in nature are sustaining, a place to breathe, inspirational, magical, a place to feel at home, to feel connection, to experience healing, to transform perspective. These and other key themes are described in detail. Experiencing transformation in nature is framed in a more enduring awareness of the relationship with nature as important, regardless of whether the transformative experience is peak or more gradual. Sometimes the transformative experience is a process of moving in and out of nature, involving reflection, meditation, therapy and philosophical reflection.

"There was this constant you know, reading, going into nature, having that experience, writing about it, talking with people about it, and that's a, you know, a big transformation." (T7.366-376)

Often transformative experience is intertwined with physical activity and frequently it is a very still moment. Even where the experience is part of physical activity there is commonly a moment of stillness amongst the activity that is transformative. A precious, unique moment is captured, as if a pause button is pressed to hold and frame the experience:

"the sun peaking through and like the clouds being as it was.....I just remember I was like, you know what, I can come here like a million other times and there will never be another moment like this. (T5. 147-157)

Describing human experiences of being in nature is difficult, and seems to leave a sense of frustration of words not being adequate, or of it being difficult to grasp hold of and understand the experience: this can feel disorienting and take time to accept.

"I just felt.... somehow different". (T7.18-21)

Sometimes the transition between different experiences is noted as important, appreciating the sun as it dries up the rain, the mist as it evaporates into a clearer sky. These transition moments are significant in themselves and in relation to what they bridge. For example the rainbow cannot be separated from its constituent parts, acting as a metaphor for the strong holistic focus highlighted as being part of transformative experience.

AN HOLISTIC EXPERIENCE

Transformation is described by several research participants as being an holistic experience at an individual level impacting on thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, meaning and beliefs. The experience crosses all the facets of existence, it is all encompassing.

" It is, it just, it hits, it hits everything" (T4.866-883)

Although it is possible to extract particular parts of the experience for consideration, as outlined below, this removes the holistic nature of the experience that is so highly valued, particular in terms of feeling embodied and of experiencing a sense of connection to a vastness or greater whole, two areas that are noted as significant by research participants.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE RANGE OF IMPACT AND TEMPORAL LOCATION OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Transformative experiences in nature are described as impacting on present experience and future intentions across all research participants and across all four dimensions of existence. Here I reflect on how the transformative experience is located in time. Separately I will reflect on time as part of the transformative experience. Transformation sometimes falls on a particular moment in time, an impact that has a distinct point marking a direct, specific, experience. Sometimes the awareness of the transformation is part of the experience, and sometimes it is at the end of the experience or outside of it; for example,

"this epiphany, of like 'I don't want to live in a building!'. 'I don't want to', I didn't want to then go back now to living in buildings. I'd realised something profound had happened to me in these two weeks of like living in a tent and having more access to the natural world. And I think that it was profound for me because, prior to that I'd not had that experience. (T6. 34-51)

In this description, after Dorothy's experience in nature she became aware that something had changed, that this was completely new territory: unexpected and opening up a new understanding of the choices in living. Transformative experience is often described as a continuous process of unfolding at times, a process of dialogue and reflection that often entails revisiting social and ethical practices, for example engagement with environmentalism or other eco-movements.

Whether or not there is awareness of transformative experience happening at the moment of being in nature, across all research participants' experiences the moment of transformation continues into time outside of the moment of being in nature.

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE ON THE PHYSICAL DIMENSION

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE TO SELF EXPERIENCE

The particular place of each transformative experience is described as being precious to the person, and there is a strong and powerful sense of emotional connection to the place.

"I love the sea and the water and things, and urm, and I always, from a very early age, always felt this sense of being part of, part of the landscape. So whenever I'm by the sea particularly, more so than rivers or lakes, when I'm by the sea I have this sense that I don't exist anymore, that I'm part of..." (T2.57-61)

Part of the emotional connection to place is a frequent sense of feeling at home in the particular place:

"it just feels more...right [being in nature], it feels more authentic, less artificial, that hey, we were meant to be walking across these fields and playing out amongst the trees,". (T3. 431-434).

At times this feeling of connection with place is experienced the moment that the person moves into the environment, for others it is a gradual feeling of relaxing into a different rhythm. Through the eyes of the person, the place is full of wonder and awe. This is at times difficult to describe and contain, having a spiritual quality and a feeling of being exquisite and perfect:

"you suddenly see Snowdon, the Snowdon horseshoe, and then the, Glas, the lake below.... and that's, that's just mind-blowing for me.....not just beautiful as in 'Oh look isn't that stunning' but that I could sit on those rocks just over the stile and just be there and that be it." (T1.135-139)

At times the place that is the focus of transformative experience has an historical connection, if not in the exact place then in a more general sense, returning to either sea-scapes, or mountains or forests at times of need and feeling a particular familiarity with the vista and sensory experience of place, for example (researcher's voice is in italics)

"So, so every time I go back to that, that feeling of being with the rocks, it brings me back into a very present moment.... *...it feels very powerful when you say that....* Yes... it is... it's been very helpful in times since." (T2.138-147)

Place links intrinsically to the quality of emotional experience in the transformation, connecting the physical dimension with the deeply personal. Sometimes there is a need to face outwards and beyond, a yearning for expansion and looking towards the horizon: *looking out to nature*. In such experiences of being in expansive nature, there seems a greater sense of connection to the whole of existence and experience. On the other hand, sometimes the need to be held and contained is met by the enveloping landscape of forests, by nature that surrounds and supports, that seems to contain and hold: *being in nature*. These experiences facilitate an immersion in, an indwelling and connection with emotional experience.

"I was living in this area but these woods over here, well they're very sacred to me and to a lot of people and they began to call me and I didn't have much energy so I could, I could only go into the woods for maybe ten minutes at a time. Because I was so exhausted but I would just go in there day after day. (T8.30-34)"

The experience of place is linked to the experience and meaning of self in the transformative experience, the physical dimension linking with both the personal and the spiritual. Looking outwards in vast open spaces, out to sea, across snowy mountain ranges, heralds a widening of self that seems to also expand both self potential and boundaries of self.

However, sometimes the attitude and feeling of being immersed in nature is important in that individual experiences are similar in differing geographies. For example, Edur experienced a magical present connection at the top of a snow-clad mountain that shared qualities with swimming in the blue waters of the Mediterranean sea.

RHYTHMIC TRANSFORMATION

Being in nature facilitates reconnection with a personal, internal rhythm that sometimes feels disconnected in day to day life. The experience feels musical, fluid and rhythmic and the sights and sounds of being in nature are described as being central to the restorative qualities of the experience, often being absorbing and therefore aiding connection to present being.

"I love the sound of the wind on my face, I love the sound of water, I really, and I really like the sound of the physicality of moving through nature. So, my heartbeat and the footfall... so these three sounds are probably my three favourite sounds..... So you get into the music of that,[the bird sound] and you get into the music of the river, and I do a lot of running along rivers, love running along the sea, you, you have nature in your face don't you, when you're in that kind of environment?" (T3. 302-326)

Sometimes connecting to the rhythm of nature takes time as the rhythms and practices of day to day life are moved aside to make room for this connection:

"it took about two days and then all the anxiety, and then all it was about was walking, seeing, hearing, smelling the nature sounds, you know, and the rhythm. All of the city rhythms were gone and there was a whole new rhythm." (T6. 116-127)

The process of settling into nature's rhythm is akin to exhaling and releasing and is a very embodied experience. Several research participants point to contrasts between this feeling of relaxation and artificial schedules that cause stress and anxiety, freeing up stuck patterns and routines of living. Sensory awareness is part of the vibrancy, joy and feeling of aliveness of the experience.

Part of the rhythmic transformation is experiencing the rhythm of the seasons differently and how this leads to a feeling of connecting with a natural order. The awakening of this realisation increases awareness of the disconnection from nature in day to day life.

"I registered that I had never experienced... um... the sort of changing of the... of nature's rhythms in a very direct way. Even though I was in my twenties and I just realised that, wow I must have been so cut off. It's the first time I've experienced spring and I'm like 20, you know." (T7.54-60)

Part of the significance of this connection with seasonal rhythm is an appreciation and understanding of being part of the cycle of time, being part of constantly moving on this earth. The kinaesthetic aspect of being in nature is an important part of connection. The shift from clock time to body time is part of the rhythmic transformation and is a result of a greater awareness of being embodied. Eating when hungry, sleeping when tired feels liberating in comparison to more usual social routines. This different relationship with body is also part of being present-focussed.

A DIFFERENT SENSORY FOCUS

The tactile, sensual experience of being in nature is described as the epitome of life. The sensory experience is extremely absorbing, encouraging a focus on being present, rather than on thinking, planning and achieving, and a focus on experience rather than on being able to articulate or understand.

"And just drinking it all in.....taking it all in without any expectation, any kind of judgment or, you know, any need to kind of... mould or design the moment..... or control it. It was just like..... What more can you do?" (T5. 163-172)

There is a very present understanding and appreciation of being in the present. This is noted across all of the descriptions of transformative experiences, slowing down self experience and contributing to the feeling of connection.

BODILY AND PHYSICAL RELAXATION AND RENEWAL

Being in nature is physically relaxing, tensions held in the body seem to lessen.

"But there's always something that I consider kind of miraculous about, you know, skiing up in the mountains and it just, my mind just kind of slows down. ...everything seems to kind of move in like, half-time." (T5. 26-33)

At the same time as the slowing down and relaxing outlined above, being in nature is energising. There is a dancing, playful quality to the experience, a slowing down of voice and pace even in the process of description. Something of this energising relates to the sort of focus and anticipation towards the experience which turns parts of nature from being an object into being in relationship.

"instead of now being an object or something that needs to be negotiated, it becomes a source of inspiration and a source of excitement, a source of energy". (T3. 175-183)

On two occasions being in nature changed the experience of bodily pain, experienced as part of chronic physical health issues. Just being outside seems to ease pain and increase energy levels: this was noted even in being still in nature, without the exercise benefits of increased endorphin levels. Part of the experience of having pain in nature is that physical pain leads to a more inward focus, whereas when a person is in less pain they feel more outwardly focussed and appreciative of wider surroundings. For one participant in pain, she was drawn to the particular place that she was in while she was in pain. Knowing that she was in pain as she chose where to sit, Alana felt accepting of her experience as part of the whole of the experience of being in nature, just as she valued the rain and the sun as part of the weather system. This experience links back to the shift in perspective that happens as the focus moves from self to awareness of being part of the system.

Going into the garden is described as being akin to a mini retreat, likened to being a 'nature bath' in terms of its relaxing quality. Part of the transformative experience is of being physically nurtured. For example, Silvester talked of feeling physically renewed in nature and that he felt sustained by nature sitting in the woods: this connects back to the importance of a particular quality of place, of place being central to the experience. Silvester's experience is akin to nature as mother, the reassurance and comfort of being cradled and held. The experience of feeling embodied is part of the sense of renewal described by research participants, of being reconnected with experience not normally part of awareness. The experience of physical renewal is also linked to emotional calming, as described in the following example:

"I began to experience like a physical renewal.....I began to experience, I began to find peace." (T8.55-56)

EXPERIENCING BEING EMBODIED

A greater awareness of being embodied is part of the transformative experience and is noted as particularly important by those people that describe themselves as often relying on their intellectual functioning or 'being in their head'. Feeling greater embodiment is likened to feeling grounded. The sensory connection of being in nature is part of this, wind blowing on the face, being open to the warmth, cold, wet and dry is a personal reminder of human embodiment. This physical awareness feels very alive, for example Linette's description of diving into freezing water grounds her in the present sensory experience and is a very vibrant, un-reflected moment. When Linette emerges from the water, her embodied feeling stays with her and she feels physically very tired, a feeling that she relishes, particularly in contrast to the heat that she feels when she is stuck in the whirring of her thoughts. Something of the feeling of being embodied increases a more holistic appreciation and awareness of self. This

seems to facilitate a more nurturing, caring and accepting attitude to self and body. Increased embodied awareness is transformative in relation to body image; feeling experience in the body rather than judging it from outside seems to facilitate more acceptance of physicality and what might more usually be judged as imperfection.

Part of feeling greater embodiment facilitates a greater sense of head, heart and body coming together, less of a sense of a split between different facets of being. This sense of holistic self is linked also to feeling a greater connection as part of nature. Sometimes going into nature seems to be a deliberate movement towards confronting holistic embodied experience., facing an expanded reality that is sometimes hidden below or behind social constructs.

TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCES OF TIME

There is a much greater focus on the present in nature than in usual life, worries about the future seems less. Time seems to be slower in the present:

"everything seems to kind of move in like, half-time." (T5.26-33)

However, there is a strong connection with past and present difficulties, particularly where life has been turbulent. The majority of research participants described their transformative experience in the context of more traumatic times, several in relation to bereavement and depression. On one occasion it was the awareness of feeling very present that was particularly transformative as it provided a powerful calmness. Part of the transformation is the shift in time through observing nature, in the awakening of the understanding that nothing lasts forever, that pain passes as the wind blows the clouds away. This is experienced as reassuring as well as simultaneously acting as a catalyst to embrace life, and particularly the present moment, in its uniqueness and impermanence. There is a strong appreciation that the vista,

the sensory experience, the embodied experience is unrepeatable. The present moment and focus is a unique part of a continual relational structure in time. The experience of awareness in time in nature is highlighted:

".....I sort of started to kind of question where I stopped and where everything else started. yes where's the boundary? What's me? What's not me? and every time, and what got me was every time I tried to capture a specific feeling I felt different... every time I was describing 'this is beautiful and the mist is coming in', by the time I'd said the words, the wind was blowing over and you could see the summit again and then the mist came in and it was like that constant evolution, and yet something was still solid." (T1.261-269)

As well as valuing and being aware of the uniqueness of each moment, there is a connection with historical time noted as being transformative, an earthly connection with ancestors, that the individual is a boundaried part of a past-present-future. The ancient, enduring nature of looking at natural landscapes is part of this reassurance and connection.

One participant felt that the intentionality and appreciation that the individual brings to nature distorts time and space, so that parts that are appreciated seem nearer.

The transformative experience of being present in nature is sometimes a pivot point, an opportunity for reflection and contemplation of past and future. Frequently it is described as an awakening to a new awareness or a different appreciation of something past: one participant talked about realizing that difficult times were receding, another of feeling that life was just different after the experience. Alana's transformative experience seems to articulate this pivot point quality of a moment captured in time and space: looking out to sea, to the unknown and looking behind her back to the society from which she had come.

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE ON THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

FEELING FREEDOM FROM SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS

Part of the transformative aspect is expressed as feeling freer from the 'shoulds' and 'oughts' experienced in society: this is experienced as a liberation from everyday rules and constraints so that present experiences are more easily accessed as they are, rather than under or within a layer of social meaning. This is described in Transcript 1:

"....that shifts, that makes me really emotional is stripping aware all the bullshit...." (T1.27-28)

There is a movement towards valuing experience without an idea of whether it is socially appropriate, indeed this leads to some degree of self-consciousness talking about the experience within social settings, that it is sometimes difficult to reflect on outside of the moment because speaking within usual social settings, sitting inside, already changes something of the experience.

Transformative experiences seem to distil the present to what is actually there, with fewer layers of interpretation or judgement at the actual moment of experiencing.

"Yes to just be there. To not be somewhere else in my head. Very there, without filter."
(T1.548)

There is an understanding and experiential appreciation of the arbitrary nature of many social constructs and getting away from everyday life is a key part of many of the transformative experiences. Getting away from social stresses is an important part: while this is often geographical, sometimes it is more symbolic or metaphorical, in that some experiences were described in such language while remaining in the same environment as every day social life. An example of this was Linette's retreat swimming in the lake in inner-city nature.

Sometimes the transformative experience is shared with people and sometimes it is in isolation. In six of the nine transcripts the experiences were in isolation; in three there were descriptions of shared experiences. In the three that included other people, one of them did

not include the other person in any description of the transformative experience, and there was a feeling that the experience was socially isolated, even in the presence of another person. In the remaining two experiences where being with another person seemed closer to the experience, the following qualities were highlighted:

1) There was a moment of shared understanding at the awe-inspiring, overwhelming quality of the experience, a sense of interconnection between the people and nature that was experienced non-verbally.

2) Being outside in nature seemed to lead to more creative conversations and ways of working, this seemed particularly linked to a decrease in prioritising social rules and ideas of what is appropriate.

3) There was a sense of trusting intuition, instinct and personal meaning and feeling able to communicate this that seemed more acceptable in nature.

Overall, there was a sense across all of the descriptions of transformative experiences that the experience was very unique and individual, that it could not be truly shared or articulated outside of the moment. In the experiences where the experience was shared this was non-verbal at the point of the experience, as detailed below.

"And we're just looking at each other like 'Oh My God', like, you know, could this be heaven? Could this be heaven? And no words were exchanged" (T5.56-63)

TRANSFORMING SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The experience in nature changes the experience of the person in their relationships with other people, part of this is feeling more accepting of the present and of self, and feeling a greater sense of space. There is a feeling taken from the transformative experience of

realising that one does not have to pretend to be something, a feeling akin to deeply relaxing and exhaling:

"I guess engage in the moment more with those I care about, like my friends and you know, being more vulnerable. Being more open, and sometimes also you know, learning how to shut up sometimes.." (T5. 671-674)

There is sometimes a different quality to personal relationships in nature, described as being more creative and open. Both the quality and content of the dialogue are embedded in the physical context. As physical boundaries become more organic and natural, so social relationships seem to open out and expand:

"you're walking across that hillside together, you fall into some kind of rhythm, you end up sharing that experience discussions become a little bit more deliberate, they become a little bit more engaging, they become a little bit more interesting a little bit more whacky sometimes, in a way that they never can be if you're sat round a, if you're sitting in a classroom situation, where somebody's presenting. Where somebody's effectively talking at you. It's that, it's that getting alongside I think." (T3.58-64)

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE ON THE PERSONAL DIMENSION

AWARENESS OF SELF IN RELATIONSHIP

The experience of self as *part of* something bigger, as connected with environment, is increased as opposed to a standalone separated being. This knowledge tends to arise in the transformative experiences, rather than being actively searched for. At times this was experienced as nature trying to tell the individuals something, and it is suggested that being open and receptive to this awareness is important. Part of the self awareness is the realisation of often being out of touch with nature, with what is already there. There is a constant theme

of rediscovering a connection during the transformative experience that is already known but that is dormant or bypassed in more everyday life.

Personal life experiences are approached less analytically as a result of being in nature, both at the time of transformation and sometimes afterwards. For example (*italics are the researchers voice*)

"trying to measure and manipulate, control a whole bunch of very complicated factors. Then you'd go and sit in the forest and realise this is all just completely ridiculous.*What? The analysis bit of it? or the whole thing?*...Maybe the whole thing, but certainly the attempt to analyse it and control it, which would be like, this is dumb." (T7.152-166)

Part of the shift in awareness relates to an experience of feeling a *more authentic knowledge*, what one participant described as a more *sensory wisdom*. There is a feeling that knowledge arises more spontaneously in this sort of experience, rather than as a result of more objective or rational analysis. Part of this is as a result of holding social structures and rules more lightly and feeling more centred in self experience. Sometimes there is a feeling of nature helping uncover feelings and experiences that have been smothered by social rules or by other people. Being in nature helps confront present being in a way that can feel raw and painful. In my personal findings, when I was grieving in the mountains I felt more in touch with an essential quality of my emotional experience that I felt unable to find and express when I was not in such awe-inspiring nature. This was related both to social constraints, to being able to accept my emotional experience as part of the present moment of being. This relates to the feeling of increased bodily awareness and a felt sense and understanding of experience, rather than a more cognitive or rational bias. For example, Ashley describes this shift:

"this deeper knowledge would come through that wiped away all that rational stuff. And that deeper knowledge is accessed through this.... or is allowed to surface by a certain kind of environment....."(T7. 171-178)

In a separate example, Alana talked about *a bodily knowing* that does not require or focus on intellectual understanding and this is also talked about in a similar vein as being in touch with a more authentic knowledge. Part of the shift towards focussing on the body is an increased awareness of what feels right when facing life choices and of being able to hold contradictions and uncertainty. In my personal findings, I described feeling a movement towards valuing self experience and feeling that being in nature helps rebalance more authentic being as opposed to usually fitting in with social norms. Being in nature increases self acceptance as outlined in the following excerpt:

"There's a bigger life going on. And then I suppose looking at that heron, or swimming through that green water, just.... there's another side to it. And it reminds me also that there's another side to me". (T9.326-330)

In everyday life, Linette views herself as someone that struggles with academic subjects sometimes. However, when she is in nature she values other qualities of herself and accepts herself as she is because she is aware of and focuses on a wider view of herself and experience. As if the two sides to her come to meet each other, whereas usually the more physically active, embodied sensual side is devalued or ignored. In my personal experience I have also felt that because I loves and care for nature, this impacts on my ability to love and care for myself, since I feel an integral part of this nature.

Part of the increase in self acceptance and decrease in self-consciousness is in the being very absorbed in enjoying the physical sensory side of being in nature. Outside of the moment, on

reflection, there is a sense of a little of the self-consciousness returning, albeit with the understanding that the experience is important and valued.

KNOWING SELF EXPERIENCE

There is a feeling of knowing oneself in the midst of feeling connected and part of nature, a profound and crucial connection with self experience. Being in nature feels like returning to a home point, or base point of self, as if being in touch with experiencing. Nature seems to help increase awareness of and acceptance of wider experience of being. For one of the female research participants, there was a sense of realising physical potential outside of previous gender assumptions, a slow unfolding of realising that she could trust herself physically without relying on a man, particularly in wild, remote environments.

EXPERIENCING LOSS OF SELF

On some occasions transformative experience involves experiencing a loss of self as part of the feeling of strong interconnection. The feeling of merging or being at one in nature is likened to losing self, or to a sort of death, as the feeling of being part of something greater is born. While this feeling of strong interconnection and losing a sense of defined self sometimes feels spiritual, at the same time it is tinged with a sadness, described as a letting go of ego in order to be at one with nature. There is a distinctly spiritual quality to this as boundaries of self are experienced more fluidly through the experience of being a part of nature. It is also connected to relational acceptance and through being very aware of and focussed on the present. The acceptance of present relational experience is part of the letting go of self because it places less value on a social construction of self, who one thinks one is, and more on the actual experiencing.

"I felt so connected that I sort of started to kind of question where I stopped and where everything else started. yes where's the boundary? What's me? What's not me? and every time, and what got me was every time I tried to capture a specific feeling I felt different. every time I was describing 'this is beautiful and the mist is coming in', by the time I'd said the words, the wind was blowing over and you could see the summit again and then the mist came in and it was like that constant evolution, and yet something was still solid." (T1.261-269)

The point of letting go of self-consciousness and of trying to make rational sense from the experience has an element of ecstasy. There was a sense of being overcome and overwhelmed.

Part of the experience is an awareness in nature that the experience of self is environmentally dependent, rather than a standalone isolated entity. Aiken describes being in a city and feeling that he knew himself and moving into a different environment and realising that who he felt he was as a person was completely dependent on that particular environment and its value structures.

TRANSFORMATION OF SELF-PERCEPTION

Changes in experience of self are often gradual and unfolding in relation to being in nature. Even where there was a very defined peak moment of being aware of a change, this was placed in the context of a slower, continuous and ongoing process. Sometimes this involved moving in and out of nature, or slowly increasing awareness and coming to terms with the realisation that nature is in fact impacting on self experience. One participant noted that this takes time; he had believed that nature did not impact on the psyche or self at all, so his experiences repeatedly opposed that belief and it took time for them to be accepted.

Transformation in self perception can be particularly powerful: Dorothy noted that her intellectual transformation feels enormous and that being in nature has completely changed how she sees herself, her self-esteem and self-worth. She feels that a door opened for her to experience herself in a new way. Transformation is also linked to more holistic awareness: a sense of playfulness that is discovered and wondered about, a feeling of being more than just an intellect, for example, having experiences that fall outside of a previous self-construct. Being in nature seems to draw the person into a very present focus, and this itself is central to the transformation of self-perception since it shifts the focus towards experience and away from definitions of self. At the same time, social conventions and rules also recede into the background, enabling present self experience to be more easily accepted. Outside of the moment this self experience is more easily integrated into any self definition. An example of this related to Dorothy's idea of who she was, in terms of what being a woman meant. Being immersed in nature for some weeks showed Dorothy a part of herself that she had not experienced before related to her gender. In nature, she felt connected to a raw, wild sense of self that fell outside of the social restrictions she experienced as attached to 'being a woman'. She felt in tune with her whole experience in nature, and felt that this was extremely liberating. When she returned to more everyday life her perception of self, particularly relating to her gender, had changed.

BEING PRESENT

In the moment of transformation nothing seems to impinge on the present, and there is almost a feeling of helplessness of having to accept what is without necessarily being able to understand or make sense of it or change it. For people who usually like feeling in control or to feel that they can articulate and understand their experience this can feel difficult. The

moment of being aware of being present is itself transformative (researcher's voice is in italics):

"Oh here I am..... I'm not trying to solve a problem. I'm not trying to put out a fire, um.....*You're just right here....* Just right here....." (T5. 544-557)

The realisation of having given up control, being in the present as it is, is central to this transformative experience. It also shows another side to being and a balance in life, where this is lacking, that is taken out of the moment into day to day life. Feeling very present in the moment without thinking about what to do next, or about what has happened provides some release and relief from traumatic experiences.

Privileging the present moment, standing still and deliberately attuning into the present increases consciousness of feeling very alive and of being embodied.

CONNECTION - BEING PART OF A SYSTEM

Nature shows hints of experience, a picture of the world that is experienced as equally applicable to self, since self and world are appreciated as part of the same system. Nature is turned to for guidance as if nature holds a mirror to self experience. Awareness of being part of nature feels liberating, since it limits the power of each individual and the consequence of each choice.

"Whether I finish my work, whether I end up being happily married for years, I'm still going to go through this rotation around the sun and it... and that's quite reassuring. I can only, in a way, fuck things up to a certain extent! (laughing)" (T9.161-165)

Contemplating the vastness of the system and realising the limited impact of each moment of experience provides a context that is reassuring. As one participant stated, it really is not the end of the world. At the same time in the midst of feeling connected to nature there is sense

of being ultimately alone and of isolation, in that each being passes in its own time and space. Each person has their individual and unique boundaries within the whole, and makes their own individual meaning in their own life.

The sense of not being alone in nature gives a sense of belonging and security even at times of feeling isolation from other people, as described in the following example:

"I felt very, very secure and safe and not alone. And I think that's the thing. It's the feeling of not being alone, even though you are in effect on your own..." (T2.123-126)

There is a notable distinction between being isolated from other people and feeling lonely: nature is sensed as if it is an 'other'. Part of connecting with nature in this way also shows something of the connections with other people, since we are all part of the same whole. This brings a different slant to the more usual separate view of individuals existing as isolated entities. On occasions nature is described as a friend, different facets of nature being personified in descriptions of transformative experience. At times not being in nature but observing it can feel painful, a noticeable experiential separation. This connection with nature is yearned for.

The experience of self being connected relates to historical connection, connecting in some sense through the land to ancestors. Being in nature is also described as being part of a biological heritage. Feeling reconnection with the earth and land grounds the self in a more enduring context.

TRANSFORMING PERSPECTIVE

Being in nature transforms what is experienced as negative in day to day life into being much more manageable. It is much harder to get cross about minor irritations and insignificant matters in nature and being in nature shifts what is important. Focus on detail is also lessened,

there is a feeling of stepping back to obtain a broader perspective. Social ideas of what is important are still present during the experience, but they take on less significance and seem more inconsequential. There is a strong understanding of the arbitrary nature of many of the rules by which life is lead. This leads to a greater clarity of what matters and what is relevant.

There is a shift in perspective from doing and observing towards a focus on being. Judgements of self that are based on social constructs are not experienced as meaning so much, partly as a result of experiencing greater self-acceptance and feeling more embodied.

Perspective is widened through the appreciation of the vastness of nature, and encourages not thinking too narrowly and not stereotyping because of the appreciation of the infinite difference and diversity in nature. Through observing other beings in nature living their own lives there is revising of perspective of self to appreciate uniqueness rather than competitive conformity.

As well as some areas of life retreating in importance, some areas increase in focus. There is an increased value of present experience focussing on detail: the heron building its nest, the snowflake as it falls, the sound of rain hitting tarpaulin.

TRANSFORMING EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

Nature is experienced as transforming emotions across a diverse range of experience.

EMOTIONAL HEALING: nature is experienced as calming and facilitates a greater sense of contentment, peace and comfort, as well as a feeling of stillness. Solace and calm are found spending time in woods, in oceans of wheat fields, on beaches, at the tops of mountains and nature seems to draw people towards such experiences. There is a correlation between feeling awestruck and feeling calm in nature. Experiences of being called into nature for emotional healing and sustenance were described by several research participants who experienced

emotional transformation comparable to that experienced in personal therapy. Dorothy described the experience of her heart becoming open and her experience of therapy as a profound moment of centring herself:

"That could not have happened to me, I know, I'm 100% sure that would not have happened to me in the therapy room, or even in a room in my house. That it needed that expansive nature experience...." (T6. 239-250)

Nature helps restore a sense of equilibrium and nourishes the soul. Nature is described as offering the right conditions for growth, helping to maintain sanity and fostering emotional resilience (researcher's voice in italics):

"you know, nothing bad can happen.....*Nothing bad can happen.... So you can cope with whatever....* Yeah, like it just wouldn't even touch me. You know, nothing's going to happen
"(T4. 343-345)

A weight seems to be taken off the shoulders, breathing slows down, there is a lightness to some experiences.

"it was a sort of stillness, a real present feeling that I had. I was fed up of the words of grief... even people with the best of intentions.....the words made no sense but sitting out there made sense. Things sort of felt ok" (T1.539-543)

Anxiety seems to dissipate in the feeling of being present; partly this is correlated with letting go of social norms and partly it is noted that moving in nature helps with anxious feelings. The following is an example of feeling stress and anxiety diminish (researcher's voice in italics).

"Before my hands were very close and that was stress and anxiety, wanting things to be a certain way. But then when I imagine myself being out in nature my hands, I just feel I want to stretch my hands out wide...*For the tape, they are stretched out wide and it's kind of, it*

feels very expansive.... Feeling. Yes again it comes back to this idea of freedom being able to breathe, those kind of things. It's like all of the stress, the worry, ideas that you have about, of what you want in your life just, 'whoosh'!" (T4. 210-218)

Once anxiety becomes less of a focus or central emotional feature, other emotions are allowed to surface and there is a sense of being in touch with what is emotionally more meaningful, regardless of whether this is pleasant or distressing. To this extent being in nature is emotionally healing in that it facilitates awareness and expression of emotional experience as it arises.

COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY AND CONTRADICTIONS: certainty is less valued in nature, in contrast to day to day life that values drawing distinctions. Being with diffuseness, subtlety and non-understanding becomes more acceptable. This is part of the experience of feeling more aware of the present and more embracing of fluid existence, of being in each moment, as opposed to focusing on more abstract ideas of what matters or how meaning is constructed.

INCREASED SENSE OF LOSS: Being in touch with experiences of loss and sadness, a sense of yearning and longing for the unknown is noted and this feels very powerful. Sometimes this is embraced, with a trust that being in nature will help facilitate this experience, and that even where this is painful it is an important part of being and awareness. This relates also to an increase in acceptance of holistic, present experience. There is also a connection with death and loss related to being part of the cycle of life. There is a connection with what is not known in nature and what is not known in self. The uncharted territory of the oceans acts as a metaphor for unconscious: reflecting on the depths and the darkness induces feelings of anxiety, in contrast to the reassurance and peace of looking at and being in what is seen.

FEELING ALIVE IN THE MIDST OF PAIN: The sensory and aesthetic wonder of being in nature facilitated a sense of aliveness in the midst of deep pain and turmoil. One participant felt that

focusing on the present helped open his heart after traumatic experiences that had felt desperate, this felt like slowly beginning to live again and part of a process of coming to terms with experience. This is linked to both the relaxing of ideas of what is right or wrong as well as a more embracing acceptance of *whatever is there in present experience*.

QUALITY OF EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE IN NATURE: Ideas of what is appropriate emotional experience and expression are less relevant in nature than everyday life. Research participants described expressing themselves emotionally as they experienced their feelings, rather than trying not to emote or holding back. Emotional experience also feels much nearer the surface in nature, tears flow more easily, and this is accepted and valued. Emotions are felt and expressed in a more bodily way, without having to make sense first. In experience of fresh grief, sadness was felt in a deeper and different way than had previously been experienced. Returning on a daily basis into wild nature helped emotional expression during the experience of grief. Witnessing the rhythm and constant flow of nature helped make sense of the sadness and loss of grief, helped the strength of feelings be understood and accepted. This corresponds with other experiences where emotions held in the body seem to be loosened, freed up or unlocked, as if detaching from social meanings, norms and practices, notions of correct or appropriate behaviour and conventional understandings. Emotional experience feels more fluid in nature, as outlined in Transcript 1:

"not try and work things out, that's the point! I don't try, things come into my mind or into my feelings and they flitter around and they sort of do something and then they..... flow, rather than me being.... So my internal voice just seems to... Either I do something with it, or something happens that I don't get that sort of stuck.....(T1.312-317)

SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE ON DEPRESSIVE EXPERIENCE: Nature provides a powerful metaphor that helps the feeling of being depressed. Looking to the dark clouds and watching them pass

over helps locate unhappy times in a wider prism of experience. The sun will follow the clouds as spring follows winter. And there will be cloud again and winter again too. Being part of the cycle of life helps guard against feeling stuck in a particular experience. This also helps acceptance of other difficult aspects of life, such as personal traits. Seeing the world holistically as part of a system fosters a more fluid attitude and provides comfort and reassurance. At the most difficult times in life, in profound devastation, nature helped depression and despair, providing solace and moments of peace. There is a glimmer of hope in the darkest of nights.

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE ON THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

MEANING

Experiences in nature provide a momentum and meaning to living connected to the feeling of being part of a larger system. The relationship with nature is described as being integral to research participants' values, perspective and meaning of life. The personal commitment to valuing the environment increases, perspective shifts to a more anthropocentric than human centric stance. Transformative experiences in nature urge people that have them to live more true to their experiences, beliefs and values, and to embrace life and its opportunities. The experience translates across different facets of life, from work to relationships, and encourages a focus away from social rules as the locus of evaluation. Part of the impact on meaning is that people wish to step outside of what is comfortable and secure and reach towards experiences that matter and that feel expansive. Across all transformative experiences there is an urge to nurture the nature-self relationship and to return to nature for replicate transformative experiences. As well as looking to nature for experiences that feel particularly transformative, there is a desire to keep in contact with nature on a day to day basis in order to increase daily wellbeing. Nature is also placed relatively centrally in terms of

environmental awareness and responsibility in the lives of people that have had transformative experiences. Sometimes after the experience there is an increased anxiety about being indoors: experiencing expansive vistas seemed to increase a feeling of being constrained on return to being inside buildings.

THE INFINITE UNSEEN

What is not seen in nature provides a sense of connection with something greater and a vastness that is described as feeling spiritual as well as being associated with the unconscious. Looking below the surface into the depths or beyond the stars for energy, inspiration and motivation is sometimes experienced as being as important as being aware of what is seen in nature. There is a spiritual feeling of being in nature as a result of the awareness of both the tiny detail and how each part links into the vastness of the overall system. The awareness of the infinite provides a reassuring peace, at the same time as creating an urgency to make each moment have meaning as part of the bigger picture. The balance between these two perspectives is described as being important. Part of the feeling of the infinite source is that it is indescribable and awe inspiring and at the same time nothing is repeated within its creation.

Nature is experienced as being divine and there is a feeling of it being worshipped and personified that takes on a religious quality. It is the focus of ritualistic behaviour and practices which are described as being important in terms of experiencing connection by some research participants. An example of the religious quality of the relationship is described below:

"I feel like that I've really embodied my body. And what that does is that it gives you a sense of peace, it gives you a sense of trust, a trust in nature, a trust in... another word I use for God

is LIFE with four capital letters. So my work for God now isn't Jesus Christ, though it used to be, or God the Father, or God the... Mother, it's LIFE. It's nature." (T8.131-137)

HEARING NATURE SPEAK

Sometimes nature seems to speak to the person having the transformative experience, as if offering meaning to the individual. One participant reported hearing meaning statements in nature, for example

"nature is the fabric upon which the imagination of the divine is written" (T8.45-47).

This, and other similar experiences, feel like nature is making sense of life experience. Another participant wondered if nature has some level of consciousness and intentionality, and whether parts of nature might be sending him positive vibes because of the energy and buzz that he feels as he runs towards them, though this seems so far outside of his usual understanding that it felt uncomfortable for him to express these thoughts.

THE FEMININE SPIRIT

Transformation in nature sometimes feels like returning to innocence, being held by mother nature. This is noted by several research participants and had a spiritual, other-worldly experience. Being in touch with the 'diving feminine' in nature is a description for connecting with a wider, more heartfelt understanding than intellectual, one that feels more like an intuitive consciousness.

THE IMPACT ON MEANING

NATURE AND METAPHOR

Metaphors from nature are taken into daily life and provide reassurance and sustenance. For example, watching the snow blow away in the wind provided a beautiful metaphor at a

cremation, a reminder of the momentum of life and death in nature and being part of a wider system. Life's limitations are experienced in nature's processes and seasons, weathering storms internally and externally, realising the limitations of control over what life throws. In one particular experience of loss in nature, loss and return were appreciated as part of a process, and this attitude has subsequently been applied more widely in her life and relationships.

AN UNREAL EXPERIENCE

Sometimes there are parts of the transformative experience that seem unreal or surreal, containing a sense of magic and awe that seem outside of everyday experience and that are difficult to capture. Part of this is described as being as if in heaven and feeling out of body. Time seems suspended in the moment of transformation, there is an ethereal, intensely peaceful moment:

"I can't tell you how magical the moment was. Like I said, time stands still, time stood even more still.... Like in this moment. It was like floating on a cloud. "(T5. 56-63)

The experience seems to be full of wonder and profoundly moving, impacting on life after the moment, as if nothing feels quite the same, as if a different part of reality and life has been glimpsed that opens up awareness across all parts of life.

INTERCONNECTION

At times the feeling of loss of sense of self in nature is experienced as being one with the trees, rocks or grass, as shown below:

"And I would stand there, like one day I was standing there in front of a tree and I could feel this tree breathing me in and me breathing the tree in. And you know and this.....A sense of oneness I began to have a lot of experiences like that with er, with nature. (T8.59-65)"

This feeling of being part of a greater, vast whole is often difficult to quantify and detail. This interconnection feels spiritual, linked to something greater beyond self that is difficult to articulate and that does not require intellectual understanding. It is likened to Buddhist Nirvana and is also described as being like a faith.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

THOUGHTS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Heuristic research requires that the researcher has "a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated" and that he or she must have "undergone the experience in a vital, intense and full way" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 14). At the conception of this research, when the idea was slowly beginning to formulate, I did not anticipate the process being so transformative. While I knew that heuristic research is a demanding process using a wide range of self experience (Moustakas, 1990), I had not accounted for the extent to which this would impact across my whole life. The initial engagement, the first stage of heuristic research, was perhaps the most exhausting, demanding and illuminating of all of the stages of the research on personal, emotional and academic levels.

Putting aside my own intellectual biases and assumptions was difficult and involved a good deal of supervisory support from my primary supervisor, as well as wondering about the phenomenon and my experience of it in my personal therapy. My initial outline ideas for a doctorate research proposal were based around a literature based analysis of Sartre, Minkowski and his ideas of time, and I have an extensive email trail between myself and my supervisor changing repeatedly between this idea and the area of transformation in nature. I found it personally difficult to accept that the experience I had in nature and this phenomenon of transformation in nature was worthy of formal investigation and I held my own assumptions and prejudices about it not being 'academic enough'.

Part of my reticence about settling on this research topic was a very real awareness that it would involve a holistic commitment on a personal level, that I would not be able to be detached in any sense from the phenomenon and that I would have to explore self-experiences that seemed murky and difficult to both accept and comprehend. Throughout the

process of initial engagement, of being uncertain, of wondering and questioning, I had a growing inner trust in my own process and experience. Towards the end of the initial engagement, when I had decided on investigating experiences in nature but had not yet fleshed out anything of the project or its proposal, I took the second Research Methods module as part of my doctorate studies. A requirement of this was a brief presentation on the area of research interest and proposed methodology. I used this opportunity to test the extent to which I was able to talk about my personal experiences, how they were perceived in the group, how I felt about personal disclosure, and most importantly whether I wanted to move outside of my more academic Sartre-based comfort zone into an area that felt more ambiguous and uncertain. The result of this personal test was that I came away from the presentation with a strong sense of knowing that it felt important to me to focus on this area and that I was relatively comfortable with the personal commitment to exploration required of a heuristic undertaking. Even at this stage, I think I also had the beginnings of an awareness that this would impact more widely on my therapeutic practice.

Undertaking a process of heuristic enquiry represented a 180 degree turn in my assumptions and perceptions of the origins of knowledge. Prior to engaging in this research, I had always approached learning and knowledge as existing on an abstract plain almost *separate from* life experience. This was not something that I had considered in any detail until I began to read Moustakas' writing (1990). When I began the immersion stage of the research, I began to trust in my own experience as a locus of evaluation, in Rogerian terms, on a more academic level (Rogers, 1969). I felt deeply uncomfortable with this when I reflected on it, and to some extent only began to value self knowledge in this way because I had been informed, by one of the books on the shelf, that I was an appropriate source of experiential awareness and thus as a valid starting point for phenomenological research. Even with the inherent and somewhat

absurd contradiction contained in those statements, I did begin to move towards a position more akin to that described by Moustakas (1990):

"The process of self-dialogue makes possible the derivation of a body of scientific knowledge that is useful. Such a process is guided by a conception that knowledge grows out of direct human experience and can be discovered and explicated initially through self inquiry." (ibid, p. 17)

PROCESS AND TIME

As outlined above, the initial engagement which I had assumed would be as simple as deciding on a title, took months of deliberation. During different phases of the research, time seemed to take on its own plastic structure, and I felt a rather limited control over the speed of different facets of the research. As part of the immersion stage, I had planned out an academic calendar, setting aside several months to recruit research participants, set up interviews and the like. In fact this part of the process happened rather seamlessly and took less time in preparation than I imagined. I had decided to be interviewed by my therapist as part of this research and this took more time than I thought as I wrestled with personal issues around disclosure. I also wanted to have a particular felt understanding of my experience of the phenomenon before I was interviewed, and this required many trips into nature and the mountains before my self-knowledge felt settled enough to continue with the process. Similarly, much later on when I was analysing transcripts I was aware of some transcripts taking much longer for me to really understand at an experiential level than others. All transcript analysis seemed to have an urgency to it, and I had an almost obsessive compulsion to continue without stopping during this phase. Overall, time seemed to ebb and flow with the research, and I felt far less structural control than I would have been comfortable with at the conception of the project.

CONSIDERING THE PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL IMPACT OF THE PROJECT

I had been aware from the point of committing to this area and method of research that it would have a significant impact on my understanding, particularly in terms of the phenomenon of transformation in nature itself. I knew it would also affect my awareness in relation to personal experiences linked to experiences of being in nature. I had not anticipated some key areas of impact that occurred during this time. From a professional perspective this research impacted on how I practice therapy on two fronts: the first was as a result of the process of the research and the second more correlated to phenomenological encounter. From a process perspective, interviewing and transcribing the interviews and being immersed in the phenomenon allowed me to reflect on my therapy practice. While of course there is a distinct difference between my therapy practice and research, phenomenological exploration is part of both. Through the process of interviewing I realised much more experientially how shared this process of investigation is; that the phenomenon is brought to life through mutually being together rather than through one person questioning and the other providing the answers. It is in reality a collaborative venture. As I began data analysis after the transcribing I realised how difficult it is to extract one statement from another and how meaning is to some extent co-created (Spinelli, 2007). This has impacted on how much of my experience of being with my clients I bring into my therapy work. I feel more authentically present than I have done previously.

In terms of the impact relating directly to the phenomenon, one of the key themes arising from the data was feeling connected and how we are all constituents in a system, a theme that I heard articulated many times. While I had tended to appreciate human existence from a relational vantage already, I have noticed that I have felt this more since undertaking my research so that I approach my work with clients much more from an I-Thou perspective perhaps than from a role-delineation (Buber, 1937).

On a personal and professional level, the struggle that I had towards the start of the project in terms of valuing myself as a locus of knowledge, was linked also to a hierarchy bias in which I would tend to revert to someone else for approval, sometimes out of a sense of anxiety rather than appropriateness or necessity. This research has helped shift this balance a little, with supervisory support that has encouraged me to use my own process and experience as a guide and treated me with far more equality than I had been accustomed. From the start of the project I knew that I would not have wanted to attempt a heuristic research project without the surety of supportive supervision. My decision to take this research route was only possible because of my robust and facilitative relationship with my primary supervisor.

REFLECTIONS ON DATA COLLECTION

My overriding impression of the data collection phase was the intensity of listening to powerful narratives recounted by people whose lives had been changed by their experiences of being in nature. The diversity of the content and context of these experiences stood out, particularly in the later stages of interviewing. At times I felt that immersing myself in these powerful experiences was overwhelming, and I felt very connected to some painful experiences that had been described. My training as a therapist helped during this time, as did my on-going personal therapy.

Going into the data collection stage with no parameters that described the place, type or content of 'nature' or 'transformative experience' helped me capture the depth and detail that is presented in these findings. While often the descriptions were very different from each other there were resonances across all of the experiences, particularly in terms of the power of the impact and the extent to which the experience felt special (see 'Discussion of the Findings below).

I had originally planned not to have a list of questions that I was going to ask during the interviews and it was suggested during the ethics and research approval process that having a list of guideline questions would be useful. On reflection, this list of questions was extremely valuable, providing a base point during interviews and helping me to focus, particularly in terms of reflecting on the impact of the experience and framing the experience in time.

REFLECTIONS ON DATA ANALYSIS

The process of data analysis involved extended periods of immersion in the transcripts in the early stages (details of each stage are outlined in Chapter 4). I began with the analysis of my own interview, which I had anticipated would be experientially very different from the analysis of the other transcripts, though in practice I felt an emotional connection with all of the transcripts.

The early stages of the interview analysis, up to and including Step D where themes were clustered, were easily identifiable as distinct steps. Steps E, F, and G, seemed less distinct in terms of process: the reflection flowed out of the description, and I had less sense of the boundaries. I revisited earlier stages if I was in doubt, particularly returning to the original transcripts. I was pleased during this time that I had documented a very clear route back from each stage to previous stages: this proved invaluable.

Although the interviews took place during the immersion stage, within the data analysis I went through all of the phases of the heuristic process. The latter steps of the data analysis, where I was clustering themes into a description and reflecting on the description, were periods of incubation, focussing on tacit awareness and experiential understanding of the phenomenon.

As the process of data analysis unfolded and I moved towards the findings stages, I wanted to make sure that both the individual and the context remained present in the findings, since both were so integral to the phenomenon. So I decided on a two-tiered approach to the findings with accounts of individual narrative experiences alongside a more thematic account from across all of the research participants.

VALIDITY ISSUES

A significant focus in terms of validity during the interview stage was considering if and how my experience of the phenomenon would impact on my interviewing and on my analysis. This is an area that I reflected on in some depth, particularly considering issues related to bias. Valuing self experience is central to heuristic process, yet at the same time I wanted to ensure that I shone a spotlight on the research participants' experience. My psychotherapy training helped greatly in terms of being used to bracketing my personal experience in order to enter in and explore the experience of the other. Moustakas (1990) suggests that our

"most significant awareness are developed from our own internal searches and from our attunement and empathic understanding of others" (ibid, p. 26).

Ensuring that I was focusing on the research participant's experience of the phenomenon became a process of checking that I was empathically in tune with and understanding the research participant's experience of the phenomenon. During interviewing this involved maintaining a combined focus on the questions and on a phenomenological approach to dialogue. My therapy training was integral to this process, and during the interviews I tried to maintain the kind of wonder and naivety that is at the heart of phenomenological practice. When I was aware of identifications or confusions with my personal experience I made a determined effort to stay with the research participant's experience. On occasions I reverted to more person-centred practices of reflection, repeating back the statement that had been

said, to allow time for consideration and encourage the participant to continue without being led in a particular direction. In the later interviews, where I had begun analyzing the earlier transcripts, I realised that I had themes in my head from other research participants. This had several impacts: I was more aware of something of the phenomenon and more open to experiences that had previously seemed more alien to me, although I also had to work very hard on occasions to bracket an additional layer of data. An example of this is in the last transcript (my voice is in italics):

"yeah, a little bit. I suppose I want to go find something instead of waiting for it to radiate to me. But, um, in the times when it's, when it does happen, there's a calmness that creeps in.... and it just.... yeah, I suppose... the bigger picture. And I feel quite happy to slot into that bigger picture.

So you feel a sense that. that 'slot into' that sense of..... I'm trying not to put words into your mouth....like with my own stuff.... so but there's a sense of.....

Connectedness

Connectedness, yeah. Finding some degree, something of place.... that image of slotting into something, being part of something. (T9. 148-159)"

In this extract I was experiencing from the research participant's material that there was some sense of connectedness, yet I wanted to hold back from saying it because it was a theme I had been reflecting on in relation to another transcript. Managing this issue successfully therefore involved checking back the experience being described in order to affirm my understanding of the content, outlined further below. I did consider whether conducting interviews in the same time frame as undertaking data analysis would impact on any intellectual bias. I concluded that because I was conducting all of the interviews I could not 'unhear' one interview before moving to another and therefore to some extent the analysis process helped me process the information, in much the same way that focusing in detail on one client in supervision helps separate out any issues and experiences, clarifying and making some sense of the locus of experience.

VALIDITY AND REFLECTION

In the analysis process the earlier stages of the Moustakas modification of Colaizzi's method are based around extracting data from the transcript, clustering that data and forming a description from it. At each of these stages I spent time checking back the context of statements, and continually verifying a direct link back to the data from the description in the various stages. Step F, the reflection on the description, in my experience was the first step that seemed to have a greater risk of moving out of the data into either other experiences of mine of the phenomenon, other readings or other transcripts (to clarify, I mean to move out of awareness through not being rigorous enough in considering in detail the locus of the particular reflection). To this end, there were times where I spent hours over a couple of lines of reflection, checking back, immersing myself in the data again, wondering about where the reflection originated. What was a great help in not getting stuck during this stage and in feeling confident progressing was that in the interviews I had often offered my reflections and observations and either had them clarified, amended or rejected. While this did not provide a direct source for Step F by any means, it did help on several occasions. An example is in Transcript 8 (my voice in italics):

"I lost my train of thought....

While you get it back, I just had that image, when you said you were digging into the earth of that, of really being cradled..... and then you were talking about the children... but you know you mentioned before the mother thing and that kind of...

No beautiful, beautiful word, cradled. That's beautiful, and that's what I was getting ready to describe and that word hadn't come to me, so thank-you for sharing that." (T8.543-548)

This extract provides an example of how I was able to have my reflection heard by the participant. It was a reflection, based on a strong felt sense, that originated in the participant's experience, yet it was an awareness that I was part of facilitating. Being able to offer

reflections as part of the interviews helped me feel more confident in articulating them in the statements of findings. I was extremely cautious in articulating such reflections to check with myself that I truly felt immersed in the individual research participant's frame of reference and experience of the phenomenon, so that such reflections facilitated exploration of the research participant's experience . As Moustakas suggests,

"Our most significant awarenesses are developed from our own internal searches and from our attunement and empathic understanding of others" (ibid, p. 26).

As part of the writing up of the findings, I sent the individual findings to each of the research participants for their comments. All individual findings have been confirmed by the research participants, with comments ranging from it being moving to read my synopsis of the experience to a feeling of self-consciousness about talking about something outside of everyday consideration. Overall there was a sense that it was difficult to put into words and some research participants noticed how much they stumbled and hesitated in the dialogue. During this process of validation, one research participant asked for a change of pseudonym which was implemented; one research participant said they would prefer for some verbatim to be removed that felt too difficult and uncomfortable, though it was difficult to pinpoint why, so I removed this. One research participant wondered about an additional thought that was subsequently added into the individual findings. One research participant suggested that my interpretations were slightly different to theirs but that this was not wrong and "in fact gave a richness". My sense of this from reflecting on the transcript was that the experiences described and narrated had been approached from a particular meaning perspective, whereas my understandings were from a fresh, phenomenological approach. Comments from research participants were extremely positive and supportive of the findings and one research participant wrote to me suggesting that the findings will inform his own practice and research in a different field of work. On a personal level, it was extremely rewarding to hear

affirmative and encouraging feedback. There was a general feeling across the research participants that something had been captured outside of usual experience, and that this was valued and prized. I felt very thankful towards my research participants for sharing such powerful and intimate experiences with me: this feeling was more mutual than I had thought and several of the researchers thanked me for taking time and care with their experience. This felt as important to the validity of my research as some of the more formal method-based processes that I had undertaken. In the context of the overall research, this verification phase felt extremely important, helping me to develop a greater sense of trust in my analysis and understanding, and therefore approach the final stages of the research and the discussion chapter with greater confidence. This validation process also provided a very important renewal of ongoing consent, in that once research participants had read the individual findings they had the opportunity to disagree, object or withdraw, though thankfully this was not an issue raised by any of the research participants.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

In this discussion I have highlighted the central details of the transformative experience and how these relate to the whole of the phenomenon. To begin with I will focus on the overall experience, before moving to discuss nine distinct themes that have been drawn out of the findings. The first of these considers the importance of place in relation to the other dimensions before moving to a discussion concerning how being in time is impacted by the rhythms of existence. From here I will discuss the third theme of bodily knowing and emotional transformation. The fourth focuses on emotional experiences and place and the fifth on changes to emotional experience, value and resilience. The relationship between present experience and personal meaning will be followed by an exploration of the transformation of self and nature. The eighth theme explores how the personal experience of

being in nature impacts on social relationships and the ninth on the relationship between being in nature, spirituality and peak experiences.

THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE OF THE PHENOMENON

I had anticipated, as a result of my review of the literature and from my personal experience, that being in nature was transformative, indeed my research was formulated from this assumption and I had only invited and included people to be part of the research who had had transformative experiences. What I had not anticipated however, was *the strength* of these experiences, particularly in terms of how much they *mattered* to the individuals and how different life would be without such experiences for the research participants. While many accounts in the literature pointed towards the importance of the relationship (Buzzell and Chalquist, 2009; Roszak, 1992), the principle focus was on healing a relationship that was defined as broken. Key to both the individual accounts and to the themes presented in the findings was that being in nature *mattered profoundly* to the person and was experienced as transformative across all aspects of life, across all of the dimensions of existence. It was almost impossible to extract any understanding on a particular dimension, such as the personal, without it being correlated to transformation across the other levels: to this extent then the experience was *holistic*. Importantly, the experience was consistently difficult to describe and capture in words, and this linked into an important finding: that *being in nature was emotionally transformative precisely because it facilitated uncovering and expansion of emotional experience and awareness that was not verbal*. Many of the research participants highlighted that it was very difficult to capture completely what the experience was like, and this sometimes seemed like an impossible task. Once research participants had read interview transcripts, many of them were shocked at how difficult it was for them to articulate their own experiences, how they struggled linguistically and how this struggle was outside of their normal ability to communicate. At times during the data analysis I felt that I risked sully-

or even losing the experience by trying to capture and frame it verbally, pin it down and contain it. Often I wanted to turn to art or music to connect with a sense of the experience, and this too showed me something about the phenomenon. I studied music as an undergraduate, and have had transformative experiences listening and performing classical music, particularly from the Romantic Period, and so I wondered about this in comparison and relation to my personal findings of being in nature. While I did experience a limited resonance, notably in terms of feeling immersed in being present and more generally feeling spiritually uplifted and inspired, it became clear to me that transformative experience in nature was not comparable to any other experience that I have either had personally or have read about. This was also obvious from the omission of any direct comparison from the findings of all of my researchers, though there were links made to particular qualities, notably meditation. Specific comparisons between transformative experiences in nature and other sorts of experiences were absent from the literature, though metaphors from being in nature were correlated to wider life experiences throughout the ecotherapy writings (for example, Brazier, 2011; Roszak, 1995).

Returning to the relevance of the not-verbal in the transformative experience, perhaps one of the most important findings was the *quality* of the emotional experience in nature, that emotions were experienced differently in nature to at other times, so that it felt that there was emotional experiencing in nature that could not be, or at least had not previously been, experienced outside of nature. There was a sense with some of the research participants that such an experience would not be accessed in therapy both because of therapy usually being indoors and because of the emphasis in therapy on language, dialogue and understanding. I will focus on these individual areas throughout the remainder of this chapter.

1. The centrality of place in relation to experience on the other dimensions

The place of transformation was an essential part and quality of the experience, rather than an adjunct to or backdrop for experience, as might be assumed in other sorts of transformative experiences. To provide an analogy: if I have a transformative experience listening to a Mahler symphony, the Mahler symphony is part of the transformative experience *and* there is a place in which the experience is located which may or may not also be part of the transformation. In the transformative experiences in nature, place *was part of the content* of transformative experience. That place was relevant and integral to experience resonates with the existential literature where 'being' is not extracted from in-the-world (Deurzen, 2011) and with ecotherapists' and ecopsychologists' suggestions that we cannot not be part of the whole of our nature (Buzzell and Chalquist, 2009; Maiteny, 2012; Roszak, 1995). However, the strength of how important the texture, aesthetic, scale, sensory *nature* of being in and feeling part of a particular place was to the whole experience was not anticipated from my understanding of the literature, and in particular how much *place felt part of being*, as is detailed further in the discussion of the transformation of self and nature below.

What might be recognized more widely as aesthetically very beautiful landscapes were prominent throughout the descriptions of transformation; nobody reported or described an experience in nature that they found ugly. Indeed, the front cover of the edition of Maslow's (1970) description of peak experiences that I used has on its front a mountain landscape that resonated with at least two descriptions in the findings and also with pictures from research participants.

The beauty and majesty of place filled people with wonder and awe, linking the physical place with a sense of spirituality. To this extent, the physical and spiritual were deeply intertwined, rather than at either end of a spectrum or hierarchy. The physical and spiritual

quality of transformative experiences were much more linked than I had anticipated, perhaps related to their shared focus away from cognitive functioning and language and towards experiencing and the sensory. Sometimes there was a connection with a particular place that seemed to match personal, emotional needs and the present being of the person: a yearning for expansion or containment, for example (this is explored further below). The historical connection that was also experienced, being part of a time continuum and aware of birth and death, linked the person in the place into the social dimension of their existence, completing a connection from the physical dimension across the spectrum of existence.

2) Transforming being in time - the rhythms of existence

The sensory awareness of being in nature was part of the transformative experience, particularly in terms of being in touch with a rhythm that felt lost or absent in normal life and that facilitated being in touch with bodily rhythms, away from ideas, cognitions and ascribed meaning. Sometimes it took time to get used to this rhythm, which felt out of synch with the schedules of social structures. This resonated with Jung's suggestion that people have slipped from nature's timings (1969). Although the focus of these structures was outside of therapy practice, for example mealtimes and sleep patterns, it would also include the 50-minute therapy hour.

The rhythmic importance of the experience had different time qualities related to it, from the immediate, as the wind blew clouds away and opened up a new vista, to the longer-term passing of time as seasons marked the ends and beginnings of years. Some of these very simple processes were described in terms of wonder, as if awakening to natural processes was a very new, revelatory experience, resonating with Caroline Brazier's detailed description of being in nature (Brazier, 2011). Part of awakening to natural processes was a reminder of birth, death and the cycle of time. Existential boundaries were confronted in nature at a very

experiential level, as was suggested by Brazier (2011) and by Pinkola Estes' description of the life-death cycle (Pinkola Estes, 2008).

The experience of time was transformed, not just in terms of being aware of the place in existence, but in terms of a shift to a more present focus and a slowing down of thoughts and experiences, particularly those related to outside of the moment. One research participant described how the whirring of the brain seemed to slow down and that thoughts seemed to move at half-time: there was a distinctly peaceful meditative quality to the experience, in line with the writings of Metzner (1999) and Winter and Koger (2010). In turbulent periods of life, being in nature provided a moment of reflection where time seemed to stand still for a moment, again as if holding and containing other worries and focuses. There was a feeling of complete absorption in the present moment, the sort of immersion Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described as correlating with a 'flow' experience, likely to facilitate wellbeing and happiness. It was significant that the majority of research participants placed their transformative experience in the context of difficult periods of life, to greater or lesser extents. Personally I had not anticipated the extent to which grief and loss ran like a thread throughout many of the narratives and this was not a specific focus in the literature, outside of the more general focus on natural processes and cycles, highlighted above. During such painful times, it had been difficult to be present just in the moment, and nature seemed to help facilitate this. Experiencing profoundly beautiful nature helped transcend pain and distress, shining a light on a different part of present experience. This seemed to feel awe inspiring and calming at the same time. Such experiences provided a different vantage to usual, daily life, and to that extent were described as broadening and reframing the vision of existence. Sometimes these experiences were critical pivot points or turning points, particularly in terms of revising perspective and focus.

3) Increased bodily knowing transforms emotional experience

Part of the physical dimension of transformative experience on a personal level was the increase in embodied awareness, experience felt grounded or centred. This linked to the experience of sensory connection and felt a priori to reflection. Importantly, it was also part of the emotional transformation, since it shifted towards the felt sense of emotional relating away from verbal understandings. Linden and Grut (2002) described this shift away from words in their therapeutic nature work with torture victims. There was a sense that embodied awareness felt liberated from words or understandings, standing in contrast to many of the assumptions of therapy practice, particularly that verbal and cognitive understanding is facilitative and emotionally helpful. This embodied felt awareness connected further into the personal dimension through facilitating a nurturing, caring attitude to self, and seemed to push bodily and self objectification further away from the locus of evaluation. Merleau-Ponty's focus on being embodied in the world resonated with the experiences of the phenomenon, since the feeling of being more in touch with embodied experience was at the same time a feeling of being connected to and part of the system, rather than experiencing as an isolated entity, disconnected or out of touch with the wider physical context: being *embodied in nature* was central to the phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Being in nature was physically relaxing and also energizing, restorative and regenerative, as Merleau-Ponty suggested when he described the body being sustained by the organism and system (1962). The relaxing feeling helped change pain perception and focus. There was a feeling of being physically nurtured, of being cradled and held in a womb-like way, soothing and calming.

Feelings, thoughts and embodied awareness were more directly accessed in nature without being thwarted by social rules relating to ideas of what was appropriate or what should or

should not be accessible or expressed, in line with Greenway's account of how being in nature can feel like a release from cultural and social norms (1995). This felt liberating, though it involved the gamut of emotional experience, meaning that grief, pain, loss, anger and the like were also more directly felt and confronted. Personal life experiences were approached less analytically as a result of being in nature, both at the time of transformation and sometimes afterwards. There was a shift in awareness related to feeling what was described as a more authentic knowledge, what one participant described as a more sensory wisdom and another described as 'bodily knowing'. This was akin to Caroline Brazier's description of nature as it "unsettles our habitual ways of interacting with life" (Brazier, 2011, p. 35). Knowledge, particularly in terms of what mattered to the person and what they were feeling, seemed to arise more spontaneously in the transformative experience, rather than as a result of more objective or rational analysis. There was also a trust in this more experiential knowledge on return to more day to day life, shifting the reliance on social rules in a more enduring way than was anticipated.

4) The role of place in emotional experiencing

The accounts in the literature, particularly in ecotherapy writings, talked of emotional transformation from two standpoints. Firstly that being in nature changes the degree of emotional experiences in nature, such as people feeling calmer and secondly that migration happens from one emotion to another, for example where a person might feel emotionally energised where they had previously felt depressed or lethargic, or experience a greater sense of wellbeing (Buzzell and Chalquist 2009; Deurzen, 2008; Jordan, 2009a; Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989; Milton and Higley, 2008). The findings of this research supported the view that emotional experience is transformed in nature in both of the broad ways highlighted in the literature, that *turning to nature facilitates increased emotional wellbeing and emotional healing*. They also seemed to support the proposal that being separate from nature might lead

to psychological and emotional disconnection and distress (Milton and Higley, 2008, p. 10) and resonated with Clinebell's idea that feeling fulfilled is related to resolving our alienation from nature (Clinebell, 1996). The discussion above of feeling very present in time was integral to the emotional experience as it seemed to contain a feeling of stillness and peace that was present even in the midst of descriptions of very painful emotional experiences of grief and loss.

However, there was an additional nuance of emotional transformation that was not articulated in the literature: that was that *experience of a specific emotion felt different in texture and quality in particular places*. In grief, for example, two people described how they felt that they experienced loss and sadness in nature that felt qualitatively different to the experience of these emotions in other places, so that they were drawn to these places to experience their feelings in a particular way. Place seemed integral to the texture and quality of the emotion.

The actual detail of the particular place in nature that was part of the experience was different across the research participants, though there were some notable themes and similarities. Firstly expansive vistas and open experiences seemed to facilitate an openness to self, as suggested in the literature (Brazier, 2011; Greenway, 1995; Harper, 1995; Milton, 2008; Roszak, 1995). In examples of being in more expansive vistas there was a very strong sense of connecting with the world, of being drawn outwards so that self knowledge was transformed through the experience of being part of nature. I experienced these descriptions as a sense of lightening, moving outwards and beyond. This openness and expansion on the personal dimension also seemed to link to an increased openness and expansion of attitude towards wider life experiences and other people which had not been specified in the literature. Secondly, closed, heavily boundaried physical places in nature, such as forests, felt containing and holding emotionally and this had not been anticipated from the literature. The descriptions of transformative experiences in nature that seemed to feel emotionally

containing felt like *moving deeply inwards and down* into emotional experience. In these examples, nature seemed to facilitate and support a strong connection with this deeper layer of inner emotional being and awareness.

5) Changes to emotional acceptance, value and resilience

Transformative experiences in nature impacted on the *value* placed on emotionality. Nature seemed to help *balance* emotional experiences and help people *accept* their experience as it was: again this was linked to the feeling of letting go of willing towards ideas of what should or should not be felt, in line with Heidegger's (2010) description of 'Gelassenheit', releasing from an appropriate level of emotionality and emotional expression and perhaps to the meaning constructs attached to particular emotions. There was a transcendental quality to the description of emotional healing, again returning to the idea that nature seemed to heal in a way that feels difficult to articulate and/or understand rationally. Importantly, in the majority of experiences this was sometimes not anticipated or expected prior to the experience, so it was not that the intention was to find healing in nature that was then experienced: this is in contrast to some of the ecotherapy practices described in the literature where people have described going into nature with an intention or specific question.

Fostering emotional resilience: Importantly, being in nature seemed to foster a general sense of *emotional resilience*, this was also something that had not been encountered in the literature. There was a feeling that what a person could cope with was expanded and this seemed related to feelings of connection, of not being alone, of being able to face uncertainty and more fluid boundaries and of changing perspectives around what is important. Being more aware of and accepting of present experience particularly helped connection with painful experiences of loss and sadness which are perhaps distanced in social environments. Although being in touch with these experiences was painful, there seemed to be a relief and

liberation from allowing experiences to arise, rather than being repressed or thwarted, and to be considered as more integrated in broader holistic experience. Roads' experience correlates very closely with the experience of the phenomenon in this study, particularly his description of "allowing a powerful inner reality to emerge". (Roads, 1985, p. 42). Being in touch with these sorts of feelings helped facilitate being able to make sense of experiences and was linked to an increased sense of being alive, even during times of physical and emotional pain. Emotional experiences were much nearer the surface in the transformative experience, allowing more fluid understandings. Interestingly, this fluidity also linked into the experiences and acceptance of emotions as part of a whole of experience of being and relating, rather than as sort of standalone entities, so that people seemed less focused on defining their experience or separating it out from knowledge or thought. This connected in with self-knowledge and understanding feeling more holistic and less separated out into different compartments of experience. To some extent, this perhaps made it more difficult to articulate and define.

6) The relationship between present experience and ongoing personal meaning

Although often the return from nature and movement away from the moment of transformative experience involved a renewed acquaintance with social structures, the felt experience of the transformative moment impacted on understanding and perception that was taken into ongoing meanings, values and intentions. At the moment of transformation nothing seemed to smother the present, there was almost a feeling of helplessness of having to accept what is: be with and in experience as it arose: coming "face to face with the deep truth of existence" (Brazier, 2011, p. 34). This feeling of being very *present in relation* shifted thoughts and worries about the future and past, and was therefore noted as particularly powerful by people who had had on-going traumatic or difficult life experiences. Part of

feeling more present involved an experience of losing or letting go of control of what was outside the moment that was also described as liberating and as a release and relief, again resonating with Heidegger's description of *gelassenheit* or releasement (Heidegger, 2010).

The moment of transformation was a movement towards clarity of experience and a focus on what actually mattered, linking personal emotional experience and more spiritual values, the sort of "dramatic breakthroughs" highlighted by Kanner and Gomes (1995, p. 91). This had a pre-reflective quality to it so that the experiencing seemed to point towards and drive the construction of meaning, rather than meaning being applied to experience after the fact. Being with experience that felt more free from social rules and constraints seemed to allow space for personal meaning to evolve out of the experience, resonating with Greenway's account of how people reconnect with something important when they feel liberated from social norms (Greenway, 1995).

7) The perception and experience of self: part of the whole and towards experiencing

An awareness seemed to arise in the transformative experience of the self being part of a bigger whole, rather than self and nature being experienced as separate entities. Heidegger's (1962) assertion that "Being-in-the-world shall first be made visible with regard to that item of its structure which is the 'world' itself" (ibid, p. 91) was supported by the findings presented here where the felt knowledge of being part of a whole arose *in* awareness, rather than as meaning applied *after* the experience. Research participants described resonating with the question, 'who am I?' in nature and felt less certain about usual self/other constructs and boundaries, resonating with Harper's questioning of the self/other boundary (1995). The sense of being part of nature was liberating, since it seemed to highlight the limits to power and choice in the context of the greater system. There was a sense of belonging in nature that helped diminish isolation, particularly where the individual felt isolated from other people

emotionally, or where particular experiences and feelings were not understood or accepted as appropriate in the social world.

The transformative experience involved a sense of freeing more fixed ideas of self-definition, getting to understand and accept self on a wider, more holistic level, and sometimes losing a sense of self when the boundaries and fixed ideas of self dissolved more radically. This seemed to resonate with Sartre's writings about existence preceding essence (1946), as if the present moment of experience in nature was the experience of surging up in the world that Sartre talks of prior to it being constructed and defined into a something, into an essence (ibid, p. 29). The paradox in the findings of both feeling a greater sense of self and losing self relates to the difference between self as structure and self as experience, again correlated with Sartre's writings (ibid). There was a greater awareness and understanding of appreciation of experiential self and a loss of a rigid structured self as the sense of connection with and being part of nature increased. This related back to the earlier discussion on movement towards valuing experience with fewer social constructs and lead to an increase in knowing one's experience and to experiencing parts of self that are sometimes valued less in a particular social environment. For example, one of the research participants felt that she valued particular physical qualities in nature, such as making fires, being self-sufficient, creating and constructing, whereas in her usual social and work environment such qualities were deemed unimportant as well as not correlated with being female and as a result she felt she usually distanced this part of her experience.

The loss of self that was described arose from the strength of connection with nature that was experienced in the transformative moment. This resonated with Hillman's writings about where we locate the boundaries of self and other, and his assertion that these are arbitrary distinctions (Hillman, 1995). This felt deeply spiritual, linking experience across all of the

dimensions. Hillman described how we cannot be sure where to demarcate self and other, and indeed that self might not all be internal indeed it might be "out there" (Hillman, 1995, p. xix). The idea then of connecting with something was to some extent thrown in the air, since the notions of inner and outer, self and other are required to support such an idea. This also was in line with a systemic approach to self and relationship, as outlined by Bateson (1972), and his critique of constructions of world as inanimate object separated from self. It was a moment of release as if freed from a level of self-consciousness in the moment of being very present, resonating with Heidegger's (2010) description of 'gelassenheit' or releasement. Part of the loss of self was an increased appreciation of the self as being environmentally dependent, existing in relationship rather than as an isolate. Understanding self in a more relational frame lead to an increase in the potential for different experiences as ideas of what an individual could or could not do, was or was not as a person, took on less certainty and significance. This increased optimism and feelings of expanded potential towards the future as more possibilities were opened.

8) The personal experience of being in nature and the impact on the quality of social relationships

The ecotherapy and ecopsychology literature seemed to focus on the individual's relationship with nature and the world, rather than on the human-human relationship, while the existential literature tended to focus on the human-human aspect of relationship. However, these findings suggested that the greater awareness and acceptance of self experience in nature impacted on the quality of relationships with other people both in nature and outside of the moment of transformation. As the importance of social roles seemed to diminish, so the feeling of having to be something in relation to another shifted and this made personal relationships more relaxing. This also related to the point detailed above that meaning shifted

towards what really mattered, and this of course included relationships with significant others. There seemed to be an increased openness towards other people while in nature, both through sharing awe-inspiring moments and through falling into a different kind of rhythm from everyday life, a rhythm that felt more in tune and connected to other people and nature.

9) The relationship between being in nature, spirituality and peak experiences

Part of the experience in nature was an increased feeling of moving towards what was not understood or what had not been previously experienced, a sense of personal expansion. This resonated with the writings across the ecotherapy and ecopsychology field (Brazier, 2011; Harper, 1995; Milton, 2008; Roszak, 1995). There were parts of the experience that felt unreal or surreal, that were difficult to capture, that seemed magical, ethereal and full of wonder, the sorts of spiritual feelings that Foster and Little (1987) described as being difficult to put into words. Time seemed suspended in these moments, which were powerful peak points of the kind outlined by Maslow (1970) as being visions of heaven, transcending and transforming day to day life: captivating and enthralling. Nature provided a connection with what was not seen and not experienced as well as what was seen and actually experienced. Experiences that were often unseen or mysterious, or difficult to articulate routinely tended to be conceived of under the 'spiritual' umbrella. However, in this research, experiences such as these seemed strongly connected with the physical dimension: felt experiences that were difficult to verbalise. The sense of connection that was also described as spiritual was located strongly in the physical dimension, being related in the physical universe that is vast and somewhat incomprehensible on both space and time dimensions. The incomprehensibility of this vastness of place, history and future was inspiring, overwhelming and transformative and felt infinite, transcending routine personal understandings. Sometimes this felt profoundly reassuring, it increased a sense of wonder and awe, at the same time as being a motivating and inspiring catalyst for living life dynamically and with urgency.

Nature was sometimes considered as divine and assumed a sort of religious focus, akin to worshipping a deity. To that extent being in nature and feeling connected in nature was transformed into feeling part of a divine or more important order that was trusted and accepted, even when life did not make sense on a personal level, resonating with Morgan's discussion of enlightenment (Morgan, 1998). This had analogies with other religious practices where the individual person felt part of the deity. Again this was part of the transformative experience in which nature felt active and integrated in the experience, rather than as 'place' in which transformative experience happened, as Milton highlighted when he exposed experience and experiencer as "being a very fragile construct" (Milton, 2008, p. 39-40).

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

The results presented in this research described in detail how nature is transformative through the powerful personal accounts of nine people, taking us closer to understanding the meaning and texture of these sorts of experiences and how they impact on people's on-going existence. Being in nature was an important part of life for all of the people involved in this research. It was central to wellbeing across all of the dimensions, variously depicted as being sustaining, inspiring, magical, connected, awareness-expanding and emotionally healing. Whether transformative experiences happened as peak moments or more gradually, they impacted in an enduring way on the lives of the people that experienced them and were described as awakening, deeply reinvigorating and shifting and shaking-up more everyday or routines perspectives and meanings. Describing the transformative moment was sometimes difficult, words and language did not seem adequate and experience itself was difficult to grasp hold of.

The actual *place* of the transformation was central to the experience, and evoked strong emotions. As well as there being an emotional connection to place, sometimes there was a historical connection. Place was important in both facilitating emotional awareness and to the experience and meaning of self.

This research also found that being in nature facilitated reconnection with personal, internal rhythms, bodily relaxation was important and the body took on increased significance as a locus of evaluation. Feeling very present was also significant: often these moments were in the context of very difficult times where people had felt trapped in and overwhelmed by worries about the future and were coming to terms with past events.

The relationship between the individual and their place in the greater system was an important realisation that tended to *arise* in the transformative experience, rather than being actively sought out. There was an illumination of having been out of touch with what is already in the world: a recurring part of rediscovering a connection. Life was approached less analytically in nature, both at the time and subsequently, shifting self-awareness. Self-awareness seemed more embodied and was described as more authentic, with a 'bodily knowledge' arising more spontaneously. Nature helped uncover feelings and experiences that had previously been hidden and there was a different quality to emotional experiences, again something that was hard to capture and put into words. While there was a feeling of knowing oneself in feeling connected and part of nature there was also a feeling of loss of self, losing a sense of being strongly defined and of being self-conscious. Day to day niggles seemed much more manageable when considered in the vastness of the system.

Nature was emotionally transforming and the quality and texture of emotions felt different. Research participants described being more in touch with their experience and being able to access emotions more freely. Emotions held in the body seemed loosened and felt more fluid in nature. Metaphors in nature helped in dark and difficult times, providing solace and moments of peace and a knowledge that nothing lasts forever.

Transformative experiences were integral to research participants' values, perspective and meaning of life and there was an urge to live more true to experiences, beliefs and values. At times, being in nature was deeply spiritual, particularly the awareness of what was described as the infinite source. Transformative moments felt like returning to a state of innocence at times to experiences either beyond or before words. The transformative moment was humbling, full of wonder and awe and difficult to quantify, a feeling of beyond self and intellectual understanding.

THE SELF-NATURE RELATIONSHIP: IMPLICATIONS FOR THERAPY

The self-nature relationship is more overtly focussed on in ecotherapy and ecopsychology than in other therapy practice where it is virtually ignored. The ecotherapy and ecopsychology approaches place this relationship as central to therapy, and suggests that there is something broken or destructive in the relationship that, if healed, would lead to increased wellbeing and healing: the self-nature relationship is the exclusive therapeutic focus and backdrop. In this research it was almost impossible to extract any understanding on one facet of existence, such as the physical dimension without it being correlated to transformation across the other levels. It was also the case that research participants did not point to healing a relationship that they viewed as either mended or damaged, but simply that these experiences had been *important and transformative in the context of their whole lives*. Therefore this research points to an approach that neither privileges the specific human relationship with the environment over other parts of existence or other relationships, as in the eco-movements, nor excludes it, as is common in mainstream psychotherapy and psychology practice. Rather further consideration needs to be made on how to include nature in practice so that the expanded awareness and implications for meaning are brought into therapeutic endeavours. While this might point towards incorporating therapeutic work outside in nature, it also equally leans towards rebalancing the focus on the dimensions in therapy practice so that at the very least 'place' becomes an important part of phenomenological exploration of experience. Bringing consideration of the 'where' more overtly into therapy, perhaps by reflecting on questions such as "what place might feel right for you?" or "how was that felt in that place?" might begin to address this. At the moment, the locus of distress or wellbeing is often explored on the personal, social or spiritual dimensions but rarely in relation to place.

PLACE AS THE CENTRE OF EXPERIENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THERAPY

This research suggests that place is a central part of the transformative experience, rather than the location for the experience, and this also has implications for how place is perceived and approached in psychotherapy. If it follows that place is central to the experience in nature then further consideration is needed of how being in particular nature helps particular emotional experiences. If particular natural environments lean towards particular emotional experiences, for example those highlighted in the research of looking out onto expansive landscapes, then further consideration also needs to be given to how particular non-natural environments might foster other sorts of emotional experiences. This of course can be at different levels, from further research projects to particular consideration of place in each therapeutic encounter. Present psychotherapy practice places limited focus on this aspect of the physical dimension, for example in assessment forms any physical dimension questions tend to relate to health. Exploring with our clients the 'where' of their experience along with the 'who' and 'how' potentially opens up a different kind of exploration and awareness.

This research found that the physical and spiritual dimensions are deeply intertwined and this raises questions again for the 'status' of nature and place, the physical dimension, in therapy writing and practice. Often place is relegated to a sort of 2-dimensional platform on which life occurs, rather than being an integral part of its creation, worthy of critical investigation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EMOTIONAL AND SELF AWARENESS

This research supports the view that being in nature is potentially healing, and it increases understanding of this experience: an increased awareness of emotional experience without social constructs is pointed to, enabling people to increase their awareness and relational understanding through seeing a broader picture. The research found that people experienced an embodied awareness liberated from words or understandings. This stands in contrast to

some of the assumptions of therapy practice, particularly that verbal and cognitive understanding is facilitative and emotionally helpful. Much of therapy practice rests on an assumption that putting into word previously unarticulated experience is helpful, whereas the findings presented here suggest emotional healing through liberation from having to make sense of articulate experience. Part of the emotional transformative experience rests on connecting to non-verbal experience without any need to make it verbal. This also raises possibilities for further research on the role these sorts of experiences might have in therapeutic work with people that have language or communication difficulties.

A further implication related to emotional experiences in nature is that if emotions are experienced differently in nature, and feelings are experienced as being freer and more embodied in nature, then conducting therapy inside might put barriers or constraints on the emotional experience in therapy. Some of the research participants described transformation happening through moving in and out of nature, periods of immersion and reflection, and this might represent the skeleton of a potential model or structure for therapy that brings the inside out and the outside in.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONER AWARENESS AND THERAPY TRAINING

This research supports the existential focus on self-in-relation and could be considered to bring 'nature' and 'place', more into the '-in-relation' than is usual in mainstream training and practice of psychotherapy and counselling. Research suggests that the person of the counsellor and the quality and emotional connection in the therapeutic relationship is central to therapeutic healing. The findings of this research imply that if we consider self-awareness in isolation from place we ignore an important quality of relational experience. If we focus on self or other awareness without reference to place, we might be limiting who we think we are and how we are available to others. Expanding the quality and texture of where we train and

practice might be correlated with expanding the potential quality and texture of our therapeutic relationships, enriching the whole experience for us and for our clients.

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APPENDIX A: ETHICAL DOCUMENTS

Middlesex University, Psychology Department

REQUEST FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

Applicant (specify): UG [PG](#) (Module: [DPROF](#)) PhD STAFF

Date submitted: [20 October 2011](#)

Research area (please circle [\(In Blue\)](#)):

Clinical	Cognition + emotion	Developmental	Forensic	Health
Occupational	Psychophysiological	Social	Sport + exercise	
Other _____				

Methodology:

Empirical/experimental	Questionnaire-based	Qualitative	Other _____
------------------------	---------------------	-----------------------------	-------------

No study may proceed until this form has been signed by an authorised person indicating that ethical approval has been granted. For collaborative research with another institution, ethical approval must be obtained from all institutions involved.

This form should be accompanied by any other relevant materials (e.g. questionnaire to be employed, letters to participants/institutions, advertisements or recruiting materials, information and debriefing sheet for participants¹, consent form², including approval by collaborating institutions).

- Is this the first submission of the proposed study? [Yes/No](#)
- Is this an amended proposal (resubmission)? [Yes/No](#)
Psychology Office: if YES, please send this back to the original referee

- Is this an urgent application? (To be answered by Staff/Supervisor only)¹ Yes/No

Supervisor to initial here _____

Name(s) of investigator(s) Charlotte Macgregor

Name of supervisor(s) Rosemary Lodge (1st); Emmy van Deurzen (2nd)

Title of study: An Existential Formulation of Transformative Experiences in Nature

Results of Application:

REVIEWER - please tick and provide comments in section 5:

APPROVED APPROVED WITH AMENDMENTS NOT APPROVED

¹ see Guidelines on OasisPlus

SECTION 1 (to be completed by all applicants)

1. Please attach a brief description of the nature and purpose of the study, including details of the procedure to be employed. Identify the ethical issues involved, particularly in relation to the treatment/experiences of participants, session length, procedures, stimuli, responses, data collection, and the storage and reporting of data.

[See Appendix 1: Project Overview](#)

2. Could any of these procedures result in any adverse reactions? YES/NO

~~If “yes”, what precautionary steps are to be taken? [Please See Attached Proposal](#)~~

3. Will any form of deception be involved that raises ethical issues? YES/NO

(Most studies in psychology involve mild deception insofar as participants are unaware of the experimental hypotheses being tested. Deception becomes unethical if participants are likely to feel angry, humiliated or otherwise distressed when the deception is revealed to them).

Note: if this work uses existing records/archives and does not require participation per se, tick here and go to question 10. (Ensure that your data handling complies with the Data Protection Act).

4. If participants other than Middlesex University students are to be involved, where do you intend to recruit them? *(A full risk assessment must be conducted for any work undertaken off university premises)^{6,7}*

See Appendix 2: Participant Recruitment

5a. Does the study involve

Clinical populations

YES/NO

~~Children (under 16 years)~~

~~YES/NO~~

Vulnerable adults such as individuals with mental or physical health problems,
prisoners, vulnerable elderly, young offenders?

YES/NO

5b. If the study involves any of the above, the researcher needs CRB (disclosure of criminal record)

-Staff and PG students are expected to have CRB – please tick

YES/NO

-UG students are advised that institutions may require them to have CRB – please confirm
that you are aware of this by ticking here _____

6. How, and from whom (e.g. from parents, from participants via signature) will informed consent
~~be obtained? (See consent guidelines²; note special considerations for some questionnaire research)~~

See Appendix 3: Informed Consent Supplementary Information;

See Attached “Informed Consent Form”

7. Will you inform participants of their right to withdraw from the research at any time,
without penalty? (see consent guidelines²)

YES/NO

8. Will you provide a full debriefing at the end of the data collection phase?

YES/NO

(see debriefing guidelines³)

9. Will you be available to discuss the study with participants, if necessary, to monitor any negative effects or misconceptions? YES/NO

If "no", how do you propose to deal with any potential problems?

10. Under the Data Protection Act, participant information is confidential unless otherwise agreed in advance. Will confidentiality be guaranteed? (see confidentiality guidelines⁵) YES/NO

If "yes" how will this be assured (see⁵)

All information will be anonymous and confidentiality will be guaranteed and explained within the boundaries of the law. This will be discussed in detail before obtaining written consent (see Appendix 2)

If "no", how will participants be warned? (see⁵)

(NB: You are not at liberty to publish material taken from your work with individuals without the prior agreement of those individuals).

11. Are there any ethical issues which concern you about this particular piece of research, not covered elsewhere on this form? YES/NO

If "yes" please specify:

(NB: If “yes” has been responded to any of questions 2,3,5,11 or “no” to any of questions 7-10, a full explanation of the reason should be provided -- if necessary, on a separate sheet submitted with this form).

SECTION 2 (to be completed by all applicants – please tick as appropriate)

	YES	NO
12. Some or all of this research is to be conducted away from Middlesex University	X	
If “yes” tick here to confirm that a Risk Assessment form has been submitted	X	
13. I am aware that any modifications to the design or method of this proposal will require me to submit a new application for ethical approval	X	
14. I am aware that I need to keep all the materials/documents relating to this study (e.g. consent forms, filled questionnaires, etc) until completion of my degree / publication (as advised)	X	
15. I have read the British Psychological Society’s <i>Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human participants</i> ⁴ and believe this proposal to conform with them	X	

SECTION 3 (to be completed by academic staff -- for student approval, go to Section 4)

Researcher..... date

PSY OFFICE received

Signatures of approval: Ethics Panel date date:.....

(signed pending approval of Risk Assessment form)

date:.....

If any of the following is required and not available when submitting this form, the Ethics Panel Reviewer will need to see them once they are received and before the start of data collection – please enclose with this form when they become available:

- letter of acceptance from other institution

- any other relevant document (e.g., ethical approval from other institution):

PSY OFFICE received

Required documents seen by Ethics Panel date date:.....

SECTION 4 (to be completed by student applicants and supervisors)

Researcher (student signature) *CK Macgregor* ... date: 20 October 2011

CHECKLIST FOR SUPERVISOR – please tick as appropriate

	YES	NO
1. Is the UG/PG module specified?		
2. If it is a resubmission, has this been specified and the original form enclosed here?		
3. Is the name(s) of student/researcher(s) specified?		
4. Is the name(s) of supervisor specified?		

5. Is the consent form attached?		
6. Are debriefing procedures specified? If appropriate, debriefing sheet enclosed – appropriate style?		
7. Is an information sheet for participants enclosed? appropriate style?		
8. Does the information sheet contain contact details for the researcher and supervisor?		
9. Is the information sheet sufficiently informative about the study?		
10. Has Section 2 been completed by the researcher on the ethics form?		
11. Any parts of the study to be conducted outside the university? If so a Risk Assessment form must be attached – Is it?		
12. Any parts of the study to be conducted on another institution's premises? If so a letter of acceptance by the institution must be obtained - Letters of acceptance by all external institutions are attached.		
13. Letter(s) of acceptance from external institutions have been requested and will be submitted to the PSY office ASAP.		
14. Has the student signed the form? If physical or electronic signatures are not available, an email endorsing the application must be attached.		
15. Is the proposal sufficiently informative about the study?		

PSY OFFICE received

Signatures of approval: Supervisor..... date date:.....

Ethics Panel date date:.....

(signed pending approval of Risk Assessment form) date:.....

If any of the following is required and not available when submitting this form, the Ethics Panel Reviewer will need to see them once they are received – please enclose with this form when they become available:

- letter of acceptance from other institution

- any other relevant document (e.g., ethical approval from other institution): _____

PSY OFFICE received

Required documents seen by Ethics Panel date

date:.....

APPENDIX B: INFORMATION FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

INFORMATION SHEET

Charlotte Macgregor, Middlesex University/New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling (NSPC), 258 Belsize Road, London NW6 4BT. Email: charlottekmacgregor@gmail.com. Tel: 07756 263484.

SUPERVISOR: Rosemary Lodge (1st) and Emmy van Deurzen (2nd), c/o NSPC, address above.

1. Study title

An Existential Formulation of Transformative Experiences in Nature

2. Invitation

Thank-you for expressing an interest in taking part in this research: any involvement you may have in this project will be entirely voluntary. The purpose of this information sheet is to provide an explanation of why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please ask if there is anything that you are not clear about, and take your time to consider fully whether or not you wish to take part.

3. What is the purpose of the research?

It is widely documented that sometimes when people are in nature they experience a change to their sense of wellbeing and how they feel about themselves. On occasions these sorts of experiences feel quite powerful and transformative. This project, and the interviews that are part of it, seek to capture the descriptions of these sorts of experiences in order to increase wider awareness and understanding. Increased understanding will lead to later detailed consideration of how these experiences relate to the theory and practice of psychotherapy, particularly within an existential framework.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

Individual interviews will be conducted to capture the descriptions of the experiences. During these interviews, which will last between 45 minutes and one hour, I will ask you to describe your experience of feeling transformed in nature. Before we focus on your experience in nature, I will ask you some brief biographical questions, including an overview of your general health and wellbeing at the time of your experience, in order to place your experience in a wider context. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed by me after the interview, and will be documented anonymously. I will be including anonymous quotes in my final report of this research. Interviews will be conversational in style. There are no 'right answers' in this sort of study: it is an opportunity to explore and share the experience that you feel is important and relevant. All information is confidential –details of confidentiality are found in

the accompanying consent form. Consent is on-going: if you choose to consent to this interview and to take part in this research you retain the right to withdraw that consent at any time.

5. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

Talking about powerful personal experiences can bring into awareness a range of feelings and thoughts. Sometimes these feelings and thoughts can be difficult and painful in unexpected, unanticipated ways. This is a risk associated with this sort of research which seeks to uncover and expand particular emotional experiences. If at any stage you feel that this is the case and you do not wish to continue please let me know.

6. Consent

You will be given a copy of the information sheet and asked to sign a consent form prior to taking part in the research. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you decide to take part you may withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

7. Who is organizing and funding the research?

This research is being organized by the primary researcher, Charlotte Macgregor, as part of a Professional Doctorate Programme at New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling (NSPC), Middlesex University. This research is neither organized nor sponsored by an external body.

8. Who has reviewed the study?

All proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by an Ethics Committee before they can proceed. The Middlesex Psychology Department's Ethics Committee has reviewed this proposal.

Thank-you for reading this Information Sheet. Please see attached Written Consent Form below.

WRITTEN INFORMED CONSENT

Charlotte Macgregor, Middlesex University/New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling (NSPC), 258 Belsize Road, London NW6 4BT. Email: charlottekmacgregor@gmail.com. Tel: 07756 263484.

SUPERVISOR: Rosemary Lodge (1st) and Emmy van Deurzen (2nd), c/o NSPC, address above.

I have understood the purpose and nature of the research study as explained to me by the researcher and detailed on the written Information Sheet, and confirm that I have consented to act as a participant. I have been given contact details for the researcher in the information sheet.

I agree to meet and be interviewed as part of this research, and agree to this interview being recorded. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, the data collected during the research will not be identifiable, and I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without any obligation to explain my reasons for doing so.

I further understand that the data I provide may be used for analysis and subsequent publication, and provide my consent that this might occur.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

PRIMARY RESEARCHER

Print name _____

Sign Name _____

Date: _____

TO THE PARTICIPANTS: Data may be inspected by the Chair of the Psychology Ethics panel and the Chair of the School of Social Sciences Ethics committee of Middlesex University, if required by institutional audits about the correctness of procedures. Although this would happen in strict confidentiality, please tick here if you do not wish your data to be included in audits:
